South Haven Tribune

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March 15, 2026

Julie Newell / SH file photos

Sherman's of South Haven at 1601 Phoenix St. now includes inside dining options at its ice cream shop.

A new scoop

Sherman's opens dining room in South Haven

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — Sherman's of South Haven is officially open for the season, which now includes the interior dining room.

For several years, the ice cream parlor at 1601 Phoenix St., has been open only at the walk-up window outside, which can discourage ice cream lovers if the weather is bad.

"Everyone is really happy now that the dining room is open, especially on days like today where it's snowing or the weather's bad," Sherman's employee Yasmin Becera said earlier this week.

Becera has been working at the ice cream parlor for four years, which has seen its share of changes over that time.

"It's not really much different – still giving people ice cream," Becera said. "A little different in how you serve people, because we are doing it a different way. We do, one person does one family, before you just write down your order and it goes ticket style."

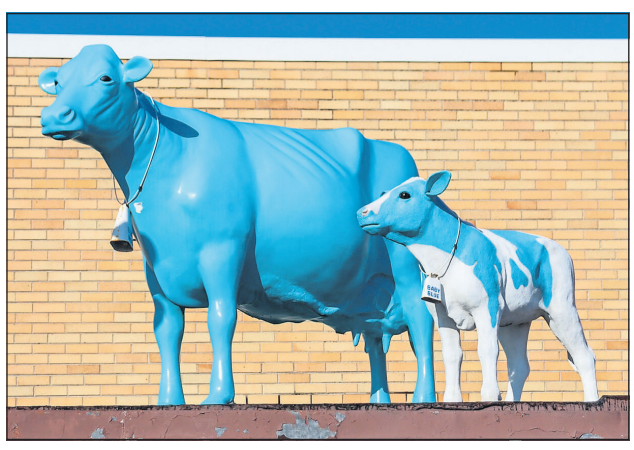
In 2019, Sherman's Dairy Bar announced it would stop producing its trademark ice cream varieties. However, in that same year, Hudsonville Ice Cream announced it would begin making Sherman's longtime favorite recipes at its creamery in Holland.

The ice cream parlor later closed and was put up for sale in October of 2024.

Mike Schimanski, owner of Oinks in New Buffalo, bought the ice cream shop and reopened it on April 11, 2025, with the new name – Sherman's of South Haven.

Sherman's of South Haven is now open with inside access from 2 to 8 p.m. every day.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104



The Sherman's of South Haven cows know as "Blue Moo" and "Baby Blue" greet customers from the roof of the ice cream parlor at 1601 Phoenix St. on Thursday.

Sherman's of South Haven at 1601 Phoenix St. recently opened its interior dining room.

Michigan AG Dana Nessel won't appeal false Trump electors decision

By CRAIG MAUGER
The Detroit News (TNS)

LANSING — Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel announced Monday her office won't appeal the dismissal of felony charges against 15 Republicans who signed a certificate falsely claiming President Donald Trump won the 2020 election.

The decision came after what the Democratic attorney general described as a "thorough assessment of the resources and time required to pursue justice in these cases, the pace and difficulty with which various courts have dealt with criminal violations of election law and our likelihood of success given stringent appellate review standards."

Katy Kildee / The Detroit News / TNS

Michigan Republican National Committeewoman Kathy Berden, second from left, listens during a preliminary exam for 16 Republican activists, of which they are included, who signed false certificates in the 2020 election attesting they were Michigan's electors and that Donald Trump won the election, on Dec. 13, 2023, at the Ingham County District Court in Lansing.

Nessel's statement effectively ended a three-year legal saga that centered on the failed bid by Trump supporters to reverse his loss to Democrat Joe Biden.

In July 2023, Nessel's office charged each of the GOP electors with eight felonies, including forgery. But in September, Ingham County District Court Judge Kristen Simmons rejected the charges, saying she believed the Republicans were exercising their constitutional rights by seeking a redress of grievances about the election.

Nessel had the chance to appeal, but, according to her office, she had until Monday to file an application for leave to appeal to the Ingham County Circuit Court.

Instead, the attorney general's office issued a 110-page report on the false

See **ELECTORS**, page A2

South Haven names Figueredo as chief lifeguard

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The city of South Haven recently announced David Figueredo has been hired as the city's new beach safety manager/chief lifeguard.

According to a news release, Figueredo has seven years of open water lifeguarding experience along Lake Michigan in Evanston, Ill., and will officially start on April 6.

"As a beach lifeguard, he educated patrons on water safety rules and performed proactive surveillance of open water and shoreline areas," the release stated. "As a beach lifeguard manager, he led lifeguards through numerous live emergency responses, delivered structured in-service trainings and was awarded the Evanston Lifeguard Service Manager of the Year in 2015.

From 2017 until 2019, he served as a lakefront supervisor, overseeing five municipal beaches and 90 seasonal lifeguards. He developed and updated training materials, policies and procedures and led the rookie and returning guard training programs.

Figueredo earned a bachelor's of arts in sociology from Carthage College and he recently worked as an associate in investor communications at Golub Capital in Chicago, Ill. In that role, he managed complex relationships and executed process improvements, technology enhancements and fund launches.

"Although I stepped away from water safety to pursue a year-round corporate career, my passion for water safety never left," Figueredo said in the release. "I am eager to bring both open water expertise and a high standard of professionalism to this role."

For more information, contact Chief Adam DeBoer at adeboer@southhavenmi.gov or call 269-637-5151.

Lighthouse Ridge Apartments project faces funding setbacks

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The Lighthouse Ridge Apartments project has hit a few setbacks in obtaining enough funding for the development project.

The project developers, Wallick Communities, was not awarded a $1 million grant that would help round out the project funds needed.

The project will include 52 units in three residential buildings and a community building. There will be a mix of two- and three-bedroom apartments, which will aim to cover up to 80 percent of the area median income.

The project is estimated to cost $16.2 million.

Part of the funding will come from the low income housing and tax credit that was awarded in July 2025. The funding will also come from a permanent loan, grants and subordinate or source loans.

During the February township meeting, Senior Development Manager Graham Welling from Wallick Communities presented a few options to trustees of how to fill the $1 million gap.

During Wednesday's meeting, Development Manager Brennon Davis said they decided to pursue the option to lower the current PILOT from 4 percent to 1 percent.

The board previously approved a 4 percent payment in lieu of the taxes (PILOT) program for the project.

The board introduced an ordinance during Wednesday's meeting to amend that previous ordinance to have the 4 percent be changed to 1 percent.

The ordinance will be considered for adoption during the April 8 meeting.

Other items

The South Haven Township board approved the temporary closure of 8th Avenue to County Road 389 for a USA team multi-sport national festival from May 13-17 at Lake Arvesta.

Tris4Health Representative Dawn Hinz said part of one of the run courses for the festival edges into South Haven Township along 8th Avenue to east of County Road 689.

The road will be blocked off from 9-11 a.m. to allow the 200 runners to use the road safely.

Hinz said other roads in Geneva Township will be closed during the event for the safety of the athletes.

"Residents are still allowed to leave their homes, residents are still allowed to go home," Hinz said. "You're not blocked from your own residence. If you are out there while there are athletes, just please be extremely cautious."

The board approved the installation of solar-powered LED traffic control devices at the intersection of 16th and 72nd streets.

"We do have an intersection in the township, it's kind of dangerous," Board Member Ross Stein said. "16th and 72nd Street. We upgraded the signs at some point, but I thought this would be a great idea to do this."

The devices will cost $9,200.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 127th Year

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Support the Local Businesses Who Help Support Our Community!

Drivers wonder if they should go electric as the war spikes gas prices

By ALEXA ST. JOHN and TAMMY WEBBER
Associated Press

When Kevin Ketels bought an electric 2026 Chevrolet Blazer last year, he wasn't thinking about the cost of gas. He just thought EVs were better and "wanted to be part of the future." Now that the Iran war is spiking prices at the pump, the Detroit man is happy he is no longer filling up his 11-year-old gas-powered SUV.

"Electricity can go up, but it won't go up nearly as much as gas will and it won't go up nearly as fast, either," said Ketels, 55, an assistant professor of global supply chain management at Wayne State University.

Experts say prolonged high gas prices may drive some EV interest and sales, especially if drivers assume their electricity prices won't be affected by the crises.

But many factors influence consumer EV purchases – and electricity rates.

Are EV owners truly insulated from price hikes?

Drivers of gas-powered vehicles are much more vulnerable to fluctuating prices that result from global conflict than those who charge their cars. The national average for a gallon of regular gas this week was $3.57, up from $2.94 a month ago, according to AAA.

Meanwhile, "residential electricity prices are regulated and are much less volatile than gasoline prices," said University of California, Davis economics professor Erich Muehlegger. "As a result, EV owners are largely unaffected by oil price shocks."

But experts say electricity prices have been increasing nationally for a variety of reasons, including surging power demand from new data centers.

"This is an inflationary event," Holt Edwards, principal in Bracewell's Policy Resolution Group, said of the war. "Is this the driver in electricity prices? I think probably not. But it's certainly a contributing factor."

To what extent oil and gas conflicts could translate to the electricity sector is yet to be seen.

What about how different grids are powered?

When it comes to the electricity an EV owner is tapping, much of the cost depends on which sources of electricity are in a local grid's power mix, experts say.

Because regulators set residential electricity prices annually, most households are sheltered from month-to-month changes in natural gas costs. Though experts say higher natural gas prices can increase the cost of generating electricity, natural gas prices haven't risen as quickly or as much as oil prices have recently.

Those are just two of many energy sources – including coal, nuclear and renewables – that power the electric grid.

"The energy component varies depending on the energy you're using and the price of the energy that you're using to generate electricity," said Pierpaolo Cazzola, an energy expert at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy. "What happens is that in the U.S., the variation of the price of the energy component is smaller than it is elsewhere."

The experts said persistent war could affect electricity bills in the future. And that is all the more reason for countries to transition to clean power, they said.

"Clean power and electrification combined is what provides the most security," said Euan Graham, an analyst at energy think tank Ember.

Michael B. Klein, a 56-year-old software developer in Evanston, Illinois, has driven EVs for the past eight years to save on fuel costs and because of environmental concerns.

Every time electrical grid efficiency improves – especially as renewables are added – "I get that benefit no matter what," said Klein, who drives a Chevy Bolt. "They can improve the efficiency of gas engines, but you have to get a new car in order to reap the benefit of that."

So will EV demand rise?

Several experts say high gasoline prices are a strong driver of EV sales, particularly if high prices persist. Drivers also consider more gasoline-efficient hybrid vehicles during these times.

Car-shopping resource Edmunds analyzed consumer shopping data for the week starting March 2, after the Iran war had begun. They found that interest in hybrids, plug-in hybrids and battery EVs accounted for 22.4 percent of all vehicle research activity on their site that week, up from 20.7 percent the previous week. Analysts also looked back at the last major nationwide fuel price surges in 2022, and they saw that consideration of electrified vehicles consideration rose sharply then, too.

But whether this means more EV purchases depends on whether buyers expect to save not just now but in the future, experts say.

Adding to the complexity: A sudden increase in EV demand could drive up prices, Graham said.

"I think the real step change would be in whether this causes governments to shift tax, tariff policies around EVs," Graham said. Doing so would help reduce fossil fuel dependence, he said.

ELECTORS

From page A1

electors on Monday.

"The failure to provide accountability to Michigan's false slate will surely inspire others to be as creative as possible in finding electoral mechanisms to exploit, at the behest of Trump or other candidates for political office," Nessel wrote in the report.

Simmons, an appointee of Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, held three sets of preliminary examinations for the Republican electors. The judge had to decide whether Nessel's office presented enough evidence to prove there was probable cause to believe crimes occurred – the standard for the cases to go to trial.

If the top charges with the steepest penalties had gone to trial and the defendants were found guilty, they would have faced sentences of up to 14 years in prison and a $10,000 fine.

"This is a fraud case, and we have to prove intent, and I do not believe there is evidence sufficient to prove intent," Simmons said in September. "I believe there's insufficient evidence brought on this record to even establish that the defendants were trained or (it was) explained to them what their duties would be."

The document the Michigan Republicans signed during a Dec. 14, 2020, gathering said they were "duly elected and qualified" presidential electors and was eventually used by Trump advisers in an unsuccessful attempt to overturn his loss to Biden in Congress.

Katy Kildee / The Detroit News / TNS

Judge Kristen D. Simmons listens to testimony during a preliminary exam for 16 Republican activists who signed false certificates in the 2020 election attesting they were Michigan's electors and that Donald Trump won the election, on Dec. 13, 2023, at the Ingham County District Court in Lansing.

Biden won Michigan's 16 electoral votes by defeating Trump by about 154,000 votes or 3 percentage points, 51%-48 percent, in the November 2020 election.

In addition, the certificate also said the GOP electors had met inside the state Capitol, but they had actually convened inside the Michigan Republican Party headquarters.

One of the electors, James Renner of Lansing, reached a cooperation agreement with Nessel's office, and the charges were dropped against him before the preliminary examinations.

OBITUARIES

Karen Webster

June 14, 1954 – March 1, 2026

Karen Denise Webster, 71, of Kalamazoo, Mich. passed away Sunday, March 1, 2026, in Kalamazoo. She was born to the late Leland and Kathryn (Brady) Springer on June 14, 1954, in St. Joseph, Mich.

Following Karen's wishes she will be cremated. There are no services planned at this time.

On Nov. 23, 1974, she married Freddie "Dale" Webster.

He survives along with her two daughters, Tamar (Bill) Burr and Amy (Karl) Conley. She also has four grandchildren; Austin Klock, McKayla White, Caleb Erb, and Madison Nichols; three great-grandchildren, Thor, Zayn and Legacy. One sister survives, Kathy (George) Vellema.

Besides her parents, she was preceded by two sisters, Brenda and Kathleen Springer and one brother, Michael Springer.

Memorial donations in memory of Karen may be made to the Ronald McDonald House of Detroit, 4707 St. Antoine St., #2/200, Detroit, MI 48201.

Those wishing to share a memory of Karen online may do so at www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements have been entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Patricia Williams

Oct. 9, 1957 – March 8, 2026

Patricia Ann Williams, aka "Tricia and Granny Pat", 68, of South Haven, Mich., passed away peacefully surrounded by her family and friends on Sunday, March 8, 2026.

She was born on Oct. 9, 1957, in Fort Worth, Texas, to the late Obide and Fannie Ruth Williams.

Patricia was a dedicated and hard-working woman who spent many years working in various cooking positions throughout the South Haven community. She was known for her warm spirit, strong work ethic and the comfort she brought to others through her cooking and compassion.

Patricia had a special place in her heart for helping people, especially seniors and she often assisted them with their daily needs, offering kindness, companionship and support.

She was preceded in death by her parents: Obide and Fannie Ruth Williams, brother, Obide Williams, Jr., and sister, Lillie Ruth Simpson.

Patricia leaves to cherish her loving memories: son, Quan (Torri) Williams, and daughter, Qualette (LaRue) Hicks, Jr. She is survived by her siblings: Walter (Christine) Simpson, and Mary (Alfred) Goodwin. Patricia held a special bond with her aunt, Gertrude Murphy and was the proud grandmother of five grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. She also leaves a special friend, Tyrone Madry, best friend, Debbie Allison, goddaughter, Falisha Ford, extended daughter, Andrea Hooker, extended big brother, Michael Batton, a host of nieces, nephews, cousins and many dear friends to cherish her fond memories.

A wake will be held from 10 to 11 a.m. on Saturday, March 21, 2026 at Solomon's Temple, 4805 Blue Star Hwy, South Haven, with a funeral service to follow at 11 a.m. Pastor Ahmmad Goodwin will be officiating. She will be laid to rest at Lakeview Cemetery.

Those wishing to share a memory of Patricia online may do so at www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements have been entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Al-Van Humane Society
Adopt ♥ Volunteer ♥ Donate ♥ Advocate
73303 8th Ave. PO Box 421 South Haven, MI 49090
phone 269.637.5062 fax 269.639.2242
Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

Meet our Pet of the Week, Abra!
Abra is a beautiful 10-month-old gray girl and the last of her litter still waiting for a home. She has a gentle, mild-mannered personality and tends to be a little too polite about asking for attention. Once you get to know her, you'll find she's incredibly sweet, social, and happy to spend time with you. If you're looking for a sweet, gentle cat who just needs someone to notice her, Abra might be the perfect match. You can submit an adoption survey at al-van.org/adopt.

Next Microchip Clinic
Keep your pet safe all year long! Sign-up today for Al-Van Humane Society's next quarterly microchip clinic on March 28th from 12pm-2pm at Decadent Dogs. Give your pet a lifetime of security and peace of mind for you for just $25 per pet. Drop in anytime during clinic hours. No appointment required. For more information visit al-van.org/microchipping or call (269)637-5062.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Purina dry kitten food and puppy food

SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PRE-K/KINDERGARTEN
ROUND UP
ENROLLING FOR BOTH LINCOLN & MAPLE GROVE FOR 2026-27
LAST NAMES A-L: TUES MARCH 24
LAST NAMES M-Z: WED. MARCH 25
LINCOLN ELEMENTARY
500 ELKENBURG
5:30-7:00 PM
JR KINDERGARTEN & KINDERGARTEN: Child must be 5 years old on or before Sept. 1, 2026. Those born between Sept. 1st-December 1st will need to complete a waiver to enroll.
GSRP PRESCHOOL: Child must be 4 years old on or before Sept. 1, 2026 & must meet certain eligibility requirements as defined by the State of Michigan. Please bring the first page of your 1040 or W2.
SCHOOLS OF CHOICE: Applications will be available for non-resident students
BRING TO ROUND UP
- Your child!
- Parent/Legal Guardian Driver's License or State ID
- Student's Legal Birth Certificate or Certified Copy
- Record of Immunization
- Proof of Residency of Current Address (lease, utility bill, mortgage statement, or another official document showing current address).
- Proof of dental/vision/hearing screening if applicable

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SH pavilion construction to begin this spring

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven will begin construction improvements at the Four Season Pavilion this spring.

According to a news release, the work will focus initially on improvements beneath the pavilion structure to install a permanent in-ground cooling system for the ice rink.

This project replaces the existing temporary ice rink system with a permanent under-slab system designed to improve operational efficiency, reliability and long-term maintenance.

"The pavilion will continue to function as a multi-season facility, supporting both winter ice skating and summer farmer's market activities," the release stated.

Construction will include the removal of the existing concrete slab beneath the pavilion, installation of embedded cooling lines and placement of a new insulated concrete slab.

To minimize disruption to summer programming, construction is scheduled in phases including:

■ Pavilion slab demolition and underground work will run from March through mid-June.

■ No construction activity between June 15 and Aug. 15.

■ Final pavement work will be completed in October.

The ice rink is anticipated to be fully operational by Nov. 15.

During active construction periods, the pavilion will be closed to the public and a portion of the surrounding parking lot will be temporarily inaccessible due to construction.

Separately, the city will perform storm sewer repairs in the Huron Street parking lot that began on March 9. Portions of the lot will be temporarily closed during construction, and minor traffic delays may occur in the surrounding area. Access to nearby businesses and the U.S. Post Office will remain available.

"The city appreciates the community's patience as these improvements are completed to enhance year-round recreational use of this important downtown facility," the release stated.

For questions regarding the project, contact Levi Skuca at 269-637-0711 or lskuca@southhavenmi.gov.

Julie Newell / Tribune file photo

The Huron Street Pavilion is used as an ice rink in downtown South Haven every winter and is set to get several updates with construction beginning in early spring.

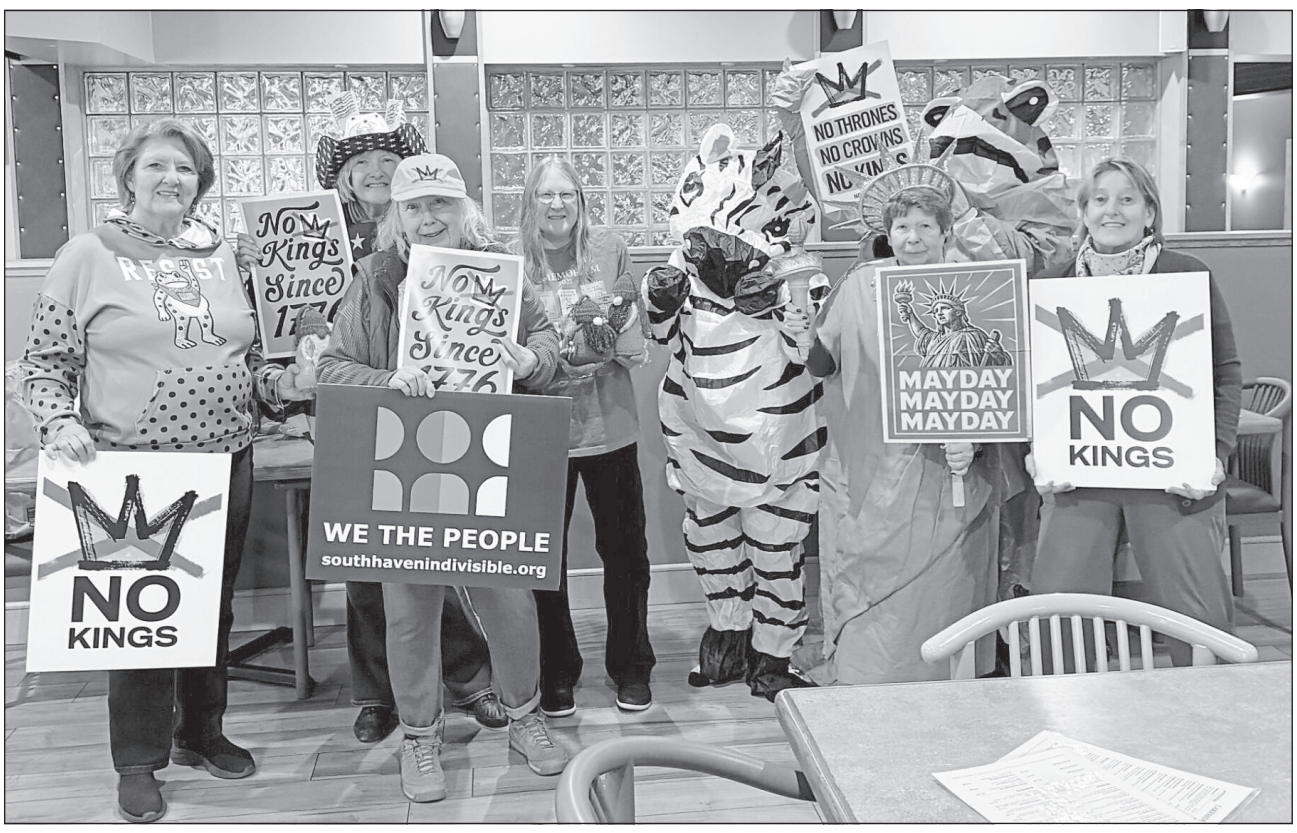

Photo provided

South Haven Indivisible is hosting a third No Kings Protest on March 28 near the First Congregational Church.

South Haven Indivisible to host No Kings protest

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Indivisible is hosting a No Kings Nationwide Protest later this month.

According to a news release, the nonpartisan action will be held from 1-3 p.m. on March 28 along both sides of Phoenix Road, east of Broadway near the First Congregational Church in South Haven.

"No Kings is a national day of action and mass mobilization in response to increasing authoritarian excesses and corruption in government," the release stated.

Area residents are encouraged to dress up in their most patriotic costumes.

"The costumes highlight the contrast between peaceful, creative disagreement and armed, aggressive responses," South Haven Indivisible Member Mary Jackson said in the release. "They change the false narrative about protestors being dangerous and violent and puts the spotlight on the fact that we are joyful protectors of democracy."

Donations will be collected for the First Congregational Church Food Pantry.

"Food insecurity is growing in our community," Jackson said. "In less that a year, South Haven Indivisible has raised over $3,000 for the food pantry."

In addition to the No Kings demonstrations, South Haven Indivisible sponsors regular pop up demonstrations.

Some of the demonstrations included:

■ On March 7, a No Wars for Kings pop-up protest was held.

■ On Feb. 12, March 12 and April 9 a series of meetings focuses on the dangers of Christian Nationalism.

■ On March 14, South Haven Indivisible's Youth Indivisible group held a "Prosecute the Pedophiles" protest on Phoenix Road, east of Broadway.

All are welcome to join the protest.

"Bring your signs, don your costumes and raise your voices in peaceful, nonviolent protest," Jackson said in the release.

For more information on the nationwide protest go to indivisible.org, nokings.org, mobilize.us.

For more information or to become involved with South Haven Indivisible, go to southhavenindivisible.org or on their Facebook page.

Photo provided

The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently welcomed The Polished Pup as a new chamber member with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The Polished Pup dog wash opens in South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently welcomed The Polished Pup as a new chamber member.

According to a news release, the chamber held a ribbon cutting ceremony at the studio located at 352 Blue Star Highway.

Owned by long-time South Haven residents Nick Kish and Jordan Alsup, The Polished Pup is a luxury self-service dog wash and grooming studio designed to give pet owners a clean, convenient and comfortable place to care for their dogs without the mess at home.

"Inspired by their love for dogs and their passion for the community, the couple developed the idea about a year and a half ago as a way to bring a unique and helpful service to local residents and visitors alike," the release stated.

The Polished Pup features three private self-service wash rooms and a self-grooming room that provides pet owners with privacy and space while bathing and grooming their dogs.

The self-service wash rooms are open seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., with no appointment required.

"We love South Haven and being part of this community means a lot to us," Kish and Alsup said in the release. "Our goal was to create a space not just for residents, but also for the many visitors who come to enjoy this beautiful town with their pets."

Professional grooming services are also available by appointment through Bree of Bree's Paw Spa, which operates inside the facility.

"Nick and Jordan hope The Polished Pup will be more than just a dog wash," the release stated. "Their vision is to create a welcoming space for dog lovers while continuing to build connections within the South Haven community."

For updates, hours and grooming appointments, follow The Polished Pup on social media.

ST. JOSEPH

SJ commission to consider new paid parking plan

City sought resident feedback, parking subgroup revisions

By LAUREN RICE
Paxton Media Group

ST. JOSEPH — A proposed paid parking plan will be back in front of the St. Joseph City Commission during their meeting at 6 p.m. Monday at city hall.

The new version follows several open house-style public input sessions in February, as well as a listening tour where city officials met with downtown businesses.

Under the plan, fewer than 200 street parking spaces in the downtown district would require payment. Parking lots are either free all day or free for up to three hours.

"In developing this proposed parking program, we engaged more than 150 city residents, downtown businesses, property owners and local and non-local visitors, listening to their feedback and incorporating ideas into the proposal," Development Director Kelly Ewalt said in a news release.

Four listening sessions were held in February to gather input from businesses and residents. Since then, the parking subgroup made some adjustments.

The new plans calls for shortening the parking program season from June 1 through Labor Day weekend, reducing the program hours from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and offering free parking passes to city residents.

"The parking subgroup has made significant changes that we hope will resonate with residents, businesses and visitors alike," Ewalt said in the release. "This version of the program really focuses on creating turnover directly in front of businesses, making it easier for customers while keeping most downtown parking free."

Don Campbell / PMG file photo

The St. Joseph City Commission will consider a new paid parking system in the downtown area after it was put on pause last summer.

The downtown development authority gave their approval to the plan already. During their meeting on March 2, board members voted – with one dissent – to recommend it to the city commission.

As before, 80 percent of the revenue from paid parking is planned to be reinvested into the downtown district.

More information about the plan is available at SJCity.com.

Contact: lrice@TheHP.com, 932-0360

Michigan Works to host job fair in April

By TRIBUNE STAFF

BENTON HARBOR — Michigan Works has announced their next hiring event where an estimated 25 employers will meet with candidates to fill their open positions.

According to a news release, the next event will take place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 29 at the Michigan Works Service Center, located at 499 W. Main St. in Benton Harbor.

The last Michigan Works hiring event brought 17 employers and 191 jobseekers together, resulting in many on-the-spot interviews and filled positions. In addition to hosting employers in various industries, the job fair will also host resource providers to help jobseekers with education, training and support services. Coy's Keto Katering will also be on site during the event.

Individuals who would like to participate should arrive at the job fair interview ready with an updated resume. Jobseekers are encouraged to preregister their attendance and view the growing list of employers who plan to attend.

Employers looking to have a table at the hiring event at no cost should contact Michael Mompremier at MompremierM@miworks.org. Capacity is limited.

For more information or general questions, visit www.miworks.org/events.

Michigan Works of Berrien, Cass, Van Buren specializes in educating, training and employing individuals of all ages.

"We work with local businesses to find out what keeps them up at night and help them tackle the most pressing challenges they may face, including attracting and retaining talent," the release stated.

Study finds more screen time linked to smaller vocabularies in young kids

By MIRIAM FAUZIA
The Dallas Morning News (TNS)

Screen time has long been a concern for parents, child safety advocates and others, particularly in the early years when a child's brain and language skills are developing. New research from Southern Methodist University adds another piece to that debate, examining how digital media use may be linked to the kinds of words toddlers learn – and the family factors that shape how much screen time kids get.

Here's what the research says and what it could mean for families trying to support language development when screens are part of everyday life.

Screen habits shaping early words

By age 2, four in 10 U.S. kids have a tablet, rising to 58 percent by age 4, according to a 2025 survey by children's advocacy group Common Sense Media. The survey found that children younger than 2 average 63 minutes of media use per day, which includes about four minutes a day watching short-form videos such as YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels and TikTok.

This shift has prompted researchers to look more closely at what screen use means in the earliest years. At SMU, assistant professor of psychology Sarah Kucker has focused on how media use relates to language development in young kids. When she began her work more than a decade ago, most studies centered on television with predictable, routine programming, such as Saturday morning cartoons; far less was known about learning from phones and tablets, where content is on demand anytime across countless apps and platforms.

Kucher began with a basic question: How is the learning process when children are watching from a mobile device? "So if they want to learn a new word like duck, then learning it as a real object that you can touch is different than if it's a picture of a duck on the phone," she said.

In a study published in November, Kucker and her colleagues surveyed more than 380 caregivers of children ages 17 to 30 months about their child's word use and how much video or TV the child watched. After accounting for the child's age, overall vocabulary and socioeconomic status, the researchers found that toddlers who watched more video tended to say fewer body-part words, such as nose or arm, and more words for furniture and people, such as mom, friend or girl.

"A lot of times, those first words are going to be nouns and objects that they touch and they feel," Kucker said, adding those words can help set the stage for building sentences and learning more complex language.

But the finding of children learning more people and furniture words was unexpected because previous research suggested that more digital media time is associated with fewer face-to-face interactions and therefore fewer opportunities to learn these kinds of words.

In another study published in October 2025, Kucker and her colleagues found the caregivers' temperaments, and that of their child's, influences digital media use and thereby language learning.

The researchers surveyed more than 460 caregivers of children ages 17 to 30 months and followed a smaller group of families a year later. They found caregivers who scored higher on conscientiousness – one of the "Big Five" personality traits referring to a person's tendency to be organized, self-disciplined and goal-oriented – reported that their children spent less time with digital media. This, in turn, was linked to higher vocabulary scores.

"We also found that children who are very fussy, what we call high negative affect, tend to have higher rates of screen time," Kucker said. "This could be that they ask for it, or the parents use it to calm them down. But when you have higher rates of screen time, you have lower language."

Some studies suggest that when adults watch a program with a child, a practice known as co-viewing, it can support engagement with the content, rather than children watching passively. But what Kucker and her colleagues found was that even when children watched with an adult or watched educational media, the relationship between screen use and vocabulary did not change. In the October 2025 study that followed families over time, children who spent more time with digital media at age 2 tended to have smaller vocabularies at age 3, regardless of the child's temperament or the caregiver's personality traits.

How to approach screen time

So how should parents think about screen time in everyday life? Kucker suggested a few approaches.

First, use age as a guide, Kucker said. The American Academy of Pediatrics discourages digital media for children younger than 18 months, except for video chatting. For children 18 to 24 months, the association recommends choosing high-quality educational content and using it together with a caregiver.

For children ages 2 to 5, the American Academy of Pediatrics advises limiting screen time to about one hour a day of high-quality educational programs.

Kucker recommends co-viewing with your child and discussing the content with them, even if they are too young to respond. Offline, take the opportunity to use real-life events or outings to engage language skills.

"If you're watching a video, connect what's in the video to real life," she said. "When you're grocery shopping, narrate as you're going, saying, 'Oh, here's the banana, do you see it? It's yellow. Here's the milk.' That's the kid's class, that's when they are learning the words. They are getting it because you are talking to them."

Vegetable gardens don't have to go in the backyard – put them out front if it's sunny

By JESSICA DAMIANO
Associated Press

If you've dreamed of growing a vegetable garden but your backyard is too shady, is paved or is simply too small, consider the front yard. Planned properly, it will not only provide a nice harvest but might even bring new friends to your gate.

Such gardens were commonplace a few generations ago, their popularity shrinking over the years in favor of lawns, which became a suburban status symbol. Fortunately, front-yard vegetable gardens are making a comeback as more homeowners learn that turfgrasses drain precious resources, and that their upkeep risks polluting the environment, soil and groundwater.

Before plunging your spade into the ground for a vegetable garden, first check whether your municipality or homeowners' association restricts what you can grow in street-facing gardens. It would also be a good idea to talk to your neighbors about your plans.

Look for lots of sun

Begin by scouting the yard for a good spot. Most edibles require at least six hours of direct sunlight daily.

You can install raised beds right over the lawn. Fill short beds with high-quality topsoil and compost. Those at or above 3 feet deep are best filled in three equal layers: firewood or logs from cut trees (never use treated wood, which contains chemicals) on the bottom; sticks, twigs and branches in the middle; and equal parts topsoil and compost on top. Moisten each layer as you go, topping with more of the topsoil mixture to raise the final level after it settles.

In-ground beds should not be wider than 4 feet. This will allow easy access from all sides for weeding, pruning, trellising and harvesting.

Sketching your plan on graph paper helps you visualize and decide on the bed's ideal shape and size.

Then create an outline for your bed right on the ground where you want it. This is best done with white flour (fill a zipper-top plastic bag with flour, clip off a corner and start "drawing") or by laying down a garden hose to define the area.

Clear and prepare the ground

When you're happy with your template, remove grass, weeds and other vegetation from the future bed using a grub hoe or sod cutter. Lightly till the soil 6-12 inches deep, mixing in a generous helping of compost to improve the drainage of clay, increase the moisture-holding capacity of sand and add nutrients. Remove any rocks you come across.

If you're willing to postpone planting until next year, you can skip the digging by laying cardboard over the area, hosing it down, then covering it with at least 6 inches of compost or a 50/50 mix of compost and high-quality topsoil. In a few months, the lawn underneath will be dead, the cardboard decomposed and your back grateful.

Before planting, test the soil's pH. Home test kits are inexpensive and widely available. Look up the recommended pH for the crops you intend to grow and amend the soil accordingly. If the pH is too low (acidic), add dolomitic lime. If it's too high (alkaline), a soil acidifier containing elemental sulfur will lower it. In both instances, closely follow package directions geared to your target pH and the size of the bed.

Most fruits, vegetables and herbs will thrive in soil with a pH between 6.0 and 6.5. Some will tolerate higher or lower levels, but some have very strict requirements (blueberries, for instance, will not thrive unless grown in soil with a reading of 4.5-5, with no wiggle room.)

Finally, incorporate a slow-release, balanced fertilizer into the soil. However, if the bed is on a former lawn that was regularly fertilized, there will likely be plenty of nitrogen already present, so use a product that contains only phosphorus and potassium (too much nitrogen may adversely affect your harvests).

Synthetic fertilizers and lawn treatments remain in the soil for about three years, so keep that in mind if you intend to grow organically.

Keep things tidy

Because your garden will be visible to passersby, aim for a purposeful aesthetic. Arrange plants according to height, create mulched pathways between beds, keep the area well-weeded and remove dead plants promptly. Mixing in some flowers will add to your curb appeal and can even chase away pests.

Don't be surprised if you make new friends while tending your new garden. Parents pushing strollers, dog walkers and other neighbors are likely to stop for a chat.

Maybe offer them a zucchini or two.

Jessica Damiano writes weekly gardening columns for the AP and publishes the award-winning Weekly Dirt Newsletter.

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COUNTY OF VAN BUREN
PROBATE COURT

NOTICE TO CREDITORS
Decedent's Estate

CASE NO. and JUDGE
2026-1036-DE
Susan Metzger, P62867

In the Matter of: Michele Marie Barz
Date of Birth: May 30, 1966

TO ALL CREDITORS:

NOTICE TO CREDITORS: The decedent, Michele Marie Barz, died on December 29, 2025. Creditors of the decedent or the trust are notified that all claims against the decedent or the trust will be forever barred unless presented to Alyssa A Sheldon, personal representative, or to both the probate court at 212 E. Paw Paw Street, Ste 220, Paw Paw, MI 49079 and the personal representative within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

March 9, 2026

Personal Representative
Alyssa A. Sheldon
6530-142nd Ave
Holland, MI 49423
(616)834-1479

Donkersloot Law Office
James A. Donkersloot, P30433
132 E. Main Avenue,
P.O. Box 230
Zeeland, MI 49464
(616) 772-9000

0900 LEGALS

PUBLICATION OF NOTICE TO CREDITORS REVOCABLE TRUST

In the Matter of: The Millie Ridner Revocable Trust

TAKE NOTICE: The Millie Ridner Revocable Trust ("The Trust") was established on December 22,1998. The Settlor, Millie Ridner lived at 08711 Riverbed Dr. South Haven, Michigan 49090. Millie Ridner was born on August 13, 1941, and died on February 10, 2026. NOTICE TO CREDITORS: Creditors of the Settlor, Millie Ridner, and/or "The Trust" are notified that all claims against The Millie Ridner Revocable Trust will be forever barred unless presented to: Martin Ridner, Co-Successor Trustee, of 67587 Allpine Street, South Haven, Michigan 49090 and April Vanwieren, Co-Successor Trustee, of 6654 122nd Avenue, Fennville, Michigan 49408 within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

Date 03/06/2026

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ATTENTION CITY OF BANGOR RESIDENTS NOTICE TO CUT WEEDS AND GRASSES

According to: CITY OF BANGOR VAN BUREN COUNTY, MICHIGAN ORDINANCE NO. 2023-1

SECTION 1. Title and Applicable Season
"This ordinance shall be known and cited as the Bangor Tall Grass and Weed Ordinance and shall be applicable and in full force and effect from April 1st through October 31st of each year."

SECTION 5. Duty to Cut Grass
"The owner and/or occupants of land to which this ordinance applies shall not allow grass or weeds to grow over six inches (6") in height throughout the growing season, including grass and weeds in the right-of-way, and it shall be the duty of all owners and/or occupants of land located in Bangor City either to cut or otherwise destroy by lawful means all tall grass and weeds, as defined in this ordinance, which are growing upon said property, before they reach a seed-bearing stage, and to prevent said weeds from perpetuating themselves and from becoming a detriment to public health. On an undeveloped lot, tall grass and weeds must be cut back at a distance of at least thirty feet from the roadway so as to allow a clear line of site for any person using a sidewalk or roadway."

Residents may obtain a copy of the full ordinance by request to the Bangor City Clerk's office. Phone: 269-427-5831 Email: clerk@cityofbangormi.gov

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SH firehouse gets custom table makeover

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Area Emergency Services recently partnered with two local business to construct a tale for the firehouse.

According to a news release, Goose Nest Woodworks and Lakeshore Iron worked with the fire department to create a table that is not only larger, but shows the history of the department.

"The firehouse is home to first responders whose 24-hour shifts include eating meals together," the release stated. "A growing staff at South Haven Area Emergency Services created a challenge of getting everyone around the table at mealtime."

The table surface consists of patient backboards no longer in service. Its metal base features the logo of the department connected by a ladder. Embedded in epoxy on the table are logos and other historical memorabilia.

Firefighter/Paramedic Cody Sedlak spearheaded the firehouse table project stands at the new table with Andrew Gossman, Carl Eastman, Seth Eastman and Bruce Parmley.

Photos provided / Tom Renner

South Haven Area Emergency Services recently partnered with local business to create a large and unique table for the firehouse.

12-year-old killed in Cass County tornado

United Way working with Red Cross in response to storms

By TRIBUNE STAFF

EDWARDSBURG — A 12-year-old boy was killed during severe weather late last week in Cass County, according to the Cass County Sheriff's Department.

At about 3:12 p.m. March 6, the sheriff's department received information indicating a possible tornado touched down in the 68000 block of Conrad Road north of U.S. 12. The caller advised police they could not find their son.

Upon arrival of first responders, it was determined he had been found and his parents were providing first aid.

Silas Anderson, 12, was taken to South Bend Memorial Hospital where he died from his injuries. Silas was surrounded by family at the time of his passing.

Sheriff Clinton Roach asked area residents to respect the family's privacy as they try to comprehend and deal with this tragedy.

A united response

In response to the devastating tornadoes that struck Cass, St. Joseph and Branch counties on March 6, the United Way of Southwest Michigan has activated the Southwest Michigan Cares Fund to support recovery efforts across the impacted region.

United Way of Southwest Michigan specifically serves Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties, but often works with neighboring United Way agencies in disaster relief efforts where necessary. Dollars raised from Cares Fund donations will go back to the United Way organizations serving the hardest hit areas including Three Rivers, served by St. Joseph County United Way; Union City, served by Branch County United Way; and Edwardsburg, served by United Way of Southwest Michigan.

The storms killed four people, injured at least a dozen others, and left a trail of destruction through communities including Edwardsburg, Three Rivers and Union City. Homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, thousands of residents lost power, and Cass County declared a local state of emergency.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer activated the state's Emergency Operations Center to coordinate the response over the weekend.

The Southwest Michigan Cares Fund was established specifically for moments like this, United Way officials said. Donations made to the fund will be distributed to local organizations and community partners working on the front lines of recovery – ensuring resources reach the people and places that need them most. United Way of Southwest Michigan will work in close coordination with the American Red Cross and United Way sister agencies throughout the region to guide those efforts.

"The Southwest Michigan region was hit hard (Friday), and the road to recovery will not be short for our neighbors," said Anna Murphy, president & CEO of United Way of Southwest Michigan, in a news release. "United Way of Southwest Michigan is committed to working alongside our United Way partners to make sure every dollar donated to the Southwest Michigan Cares Fund reaches the people and communities that need it most. If you are able to give, please give. If you are able to volunteer, please sign up. And if you need help, please reach out to 211."

How to help

Southwest Michigan residents who want to help are encouraged to donate online at SouthwestMichiganCares.com. Volunteers can sign up to assist with recovery efforts at Volunteer.UWSM.org as upcoming volunteer projects throughout the region are assessed and posted.

Volunteers should create a free profile on the "Volunteer United" site now to be alerted about opportunities as they become available in the coming days.

Those in need of immediate assistance should contact the American Red Cross at 1-800-RED-CROSS or dial 211 to be connected with local support services for food, shelter, caregiving, utility assistance and more.

Beware of scams

The Cass County Sheriff's Department put out a warning Monday for homeowners in the areas affected by the recent tornado about possible scams.

Anyone who has damage to their home or other structures, they are being asked to be cautious when dealing with unfamiliar companies or contractors. People should be alert for individuals who are pushy, insist on giving them an immediate quote, or ask for money upfront.

Anyone who has homeowners' insurance, should refer all contractors to the insurance company.

"Do not let anyone pressure you into making a down payment by claiming they will be too busy to return later," Sheriff Roach said in a news release. "If a contractor is pushy, use caution."

For those with tree damage, Roach said to also be aware of individuals or companies from outside the area who offer to clean up a yard for cash or a discounted price if anyone agrees immediately and pays a deposit.

Be cautious of people who begin work without permission and then demand payment. Again, refer all individuals and companies to your insurance provider. If they are pushy, use caution.

"If you don't live in the affected areas, please stay out of the area so emergency and cleanup crews can do their work safely and efficiently," Roach said.

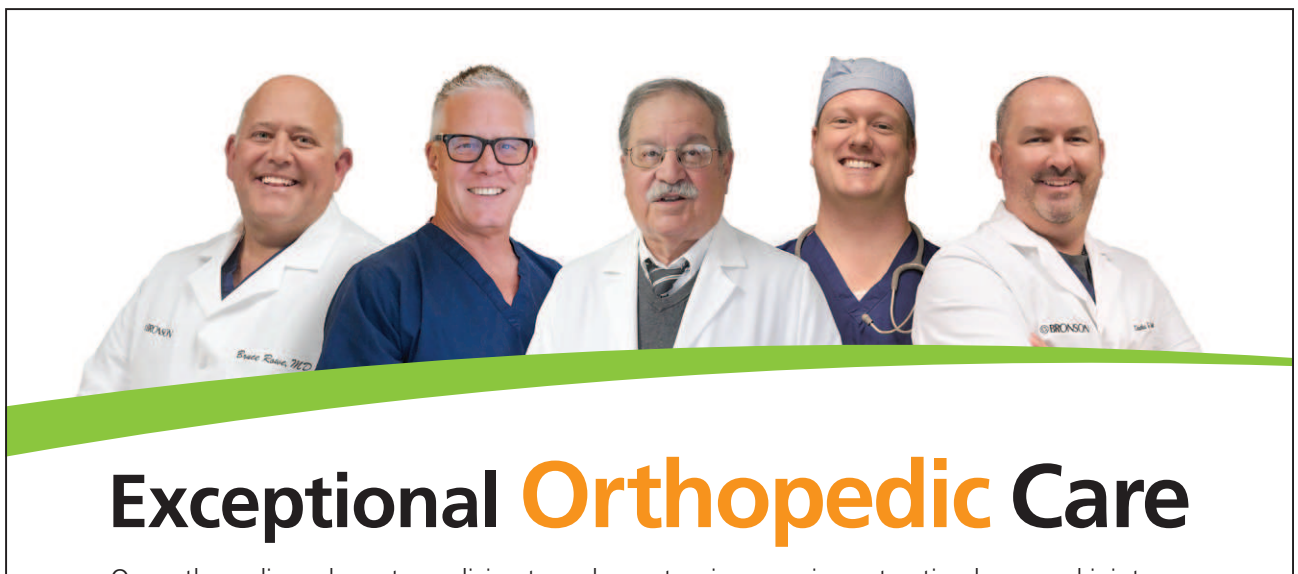
Cass County Emergency Manager Manny DeLaRosa said a nonprofit has a crew assessing the damage at the affected sites in preparation for a volunteer cleanup crew that is scheduled to deploy in the coming days. More details will come once the assessment is completed.

"We will have a link posted on our website as soon as they are ready where people can fill out the application requesting assistance," DeLaRosa said.

As cleanup continues, many have reached out to ask how to assist those affected by the tornado. A list of resources and opportunities to donate is available at casscountymi.org/tornado.

Photo provided / Cass County

Cass County emergency personnel are working to clear debris and provide support to those affected by a tornado that touched down near Edwardsburg on March 6.



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SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Kiteboarders take advantage of windy conditions Monday off Tiscornia Beach in St. Joseph.

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

South Haven Memorial Library: Bridge Card Game from 1 to 4 p.m. every Tuesday and Wednesday. Open to the public. Beginners are welcome.

South Haven Memorial Library: Food Drive for non-perishable food items from March 5 through 31. For each item brought, you will be eligible for $0.50 in fine forgiveness up to $5.00 total.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: March 1 through 31 "What Grew in Larry's Garden" by Laura Alary and Kass Reich StoryWalk. The museum is closed but appointments can be scheduled by calling 630-842-9458.

Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for students grades 6 through 12 every Monday from 3 to 5 p.m.

March

15 – South Haven High School: fall production of "The Olympians" at 2 p.m.

15 – First Congregational UCC: Concert series featuring The Manhattan Dolls at 3 p.m. Tickets are $20 at the door.

17 – Scott Club: Celebrate St. Patrick's Day with music, Celtics and classics at 1 p.m. at Senior Services.

17 – South Haven Center for the Arts: Needle felting projects for 4th and 5th graders from 4 to 5 p.m. Supplies included.

18 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

19 – South Haven Memorial Library: DIY at the library event to learn how to make homemade sugar scrubs at 4 p.m.

19 – Baseball: Boys Junior Varsity against Michigan Lutheran High School at 4 p.m.

19-20 – Our Town Players: Auditions for "The Mad Tea Party" from 6 to 8 p.m. at the South Haven Center for the Arts. Open for actors ages 13 and older. The cast is up to 15 actors.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play Fridays for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon. Wear clothes that can get messy.

21 – South Haven Memorial Library: Free STEM Saturdays event with legos and other rotating STEM activities from 11 a.m. to noon.

23 – Baseball: Boys junior varsity against Three Rivers High School at 4 p.m.

25 – South Haven Memorial Library: Friends of the South Haven library meeting from 2 to 3 p.m. The public is welcome to attend.

25 – Baseball: Boys junior varsity against Berrien Springs High School at 4 p.m.

25 – South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce: South Haven High School summer job fair.

27 – South Haven Memorial Library: Parent Cafes from 11 a.m. to noon. Snacks and engaging conversation about self-care, support and community resources. Free event. Kids can enjoy Stuffed Animal Story Time with the library staff during the event.

28 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club at 11 a.m.

28 – South Haven Indivisible: No Kings 3 protest from 1 to 3 p.m. on Phoenix Road east of Broadway near First Congregational Church.

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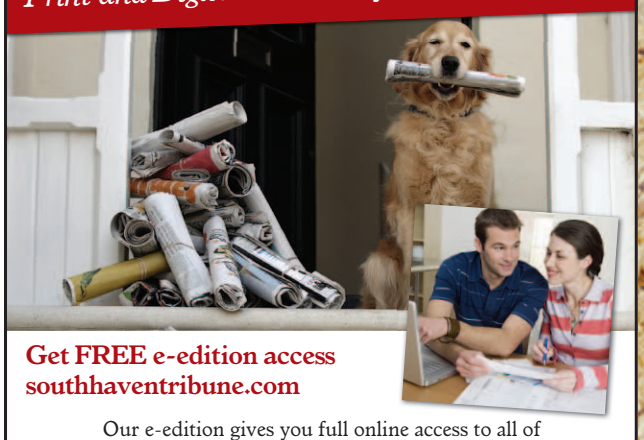

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Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times / TNS

A student checks in with his phone at Harvard-Westlake School in Studio City, California, on Dec. 18. The school's new cell phone ban went into effect this fall and prohibits students from having phones out on campus – even during lunch break. The school now requires students to scan a QR code when they enter and check in to Opal screen-time app that blocks students from using apps like Instagram and Snapchat.

Embracing the 'analog lifestyle'

Influencers are ditching their digital devices – here's how to join them

By KAREN GARCIA
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

At the dawn of 2026, social media influencers at home and abroad proclaimed it the year of the "analog lifestyle," a call to reduce digital connectivity as smart tech and screen time dominate a person's attention span.

Selly Tan, an influencer from California, said people are "craving something real again," and vowed to print her photos, read more books and magazines and take up hobbies that don't need Wi-Fi.

Rosie Okatcha, an influencer from the U.K., proclaimed the year would be "The Age of Analog" with consumers swapping music streaming for iPods and vinyl records, and choosing crafting over doomscrolling.

Sanchi Oswal, an influencer from Germany, said in a post she felt going analog would reduce her "exposure and reliance on digital stimuli" and, in particular, to her phone.

For a generation that grew up in an entirely digital world, dependence on technology is a familiar habit that some are trying to break.

"From noon to 5 p.m., I'm looking at screens all day and then I'm going home and I'm just looking at my phone, scrolling on social media," said Lillie Beacope, a senior at USC enrolled in a class on entertainment, marketing and culture. "I just feel like there's not a chance for us within our day-to-day lives, to really get a break from technology."

Spend any time outside, and you'll see people of all ages are constantly on their smartphone or other digital devices for day-to-day tasks including communication, translation, navigation, delivery services, planning and entertainment. According to Pew Research Center data released in 2025, an estimated 91 percent of U.S. adults own a smartphone, up from 35 percent when the center first surveyed smartphone ownership in 2011.

The goal of the "analog lifestyle" trend is to wean people off constant digital connectivity by doing tangible activities that help a person reclaim their time.

But the smartphone isn't the villain in this story, it's a tool, said Natalia Khodayari, a postdoctoral researcher in the UC Davis Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

"It's a handy tool, but this tool can be challenging to manage," she said.

Why now?

Smartphone dependence has existed for years, but experts say it was compounded for people when the COVID-19 pandemic forced people indoors for weeks and months on end.

"People were upset, depressed and scared," and all they had were their phones, Zoom and immediate family, said Karen North, a professor of digital social media and psychology at USC.

But years removed from the lockdowns, people are starting to notice how compelled they still are to look at their phones for information, to shop, or for nothing at all.

"It's almost like biting your nails or another nervous habit," North said.

Not only can the device itself be addictive, but many phone apps are designed to capture and keep a person's attention, though people are becoming increasingly aware of this, said Dr. Anna Lembke, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford.

"There are enormous opportunity costs to engagement on these platforms that suck [people] in, where they end up spending way more time than they plan to or want to," Lembke said. "It's very clear from survey studies that people are less happy now than they were 15 to 20 years ago."

This, however, won't be the first time people have tried to exit the online world, even if just temporarily.

In 2010, Mintel, a global market intelligence and research agency, promoted a "switching off" trend because it anticipated consumers would want to take significant breaks from their digital devices because modern technology had created "inescapable levels of connectivity."

But the fear of missing out, or "FOMO," that comes with disconnecting can be equally daunting, some say.

"It kind of sucks to be accessible all the time and having to reply to everything, but at the same time I think in the digital age where you are so readily accessible, to not respond is then to not be a part of a community," said USC senior Maya Din.

Experts say these feelings are coinciding with the advent of the internet, digital media and this concept of 24/7 access.

People are trying to make sense of their unhappiness, which is leading them to "making a valid connection between their online lives and their overall psychological state of being, which is not good," Lembke said.

Studies have shown a correlation between heavy digital dependence and mental health challenges including depression, anxiety and stress.

Even though the concept of stepping away from our digital lives isn't new, North said TikTok challenges and social media trends "tell us, 'It's not just you, it's everybody,'" and here's what you can do about it.

How is the 'analog lifestyle' trend different?

The analog trend is a different way to kick the digital habit because by embracing old technology and spending time on crafting projects experts say people are trying to be entertained or relax in ways that don't involve being online.

The goal of this trend "is a desire to rebalance time and energy and reduce distractability and related stress," said Khodayari, whose research focuses on the mechanisms of attention and emotion.

Generally, it's really easy to get distracted given the diversity and convenience modern-day life offers.

"Imagine when there exists one space which houses your work, relaxation, communication, music, daily planner and food services, it can be quite challenging for individuals to really stay present towards one activity or one goal on a day-to-day basis," she said.

In 2018, a study published in the National Library of Medicine observed how many times 216 participants checked their smartphones over the course of 56 days. The study led by Dr. Larry Rosen, professor emeritus and past chair of the psychology department at Cal State Dominguez Hills, found that participants unlocked their phones more than 60 times a day for three to four minutes each time, which equaled a total of 220 daily minutes of use.

Not surprisingly, the analog lifestyle is being adopted by young adults and younger generations as a way to be more mindful, more intentional.

"I think that's a really big theme here, is creating boundaries," Khodayari said.

How to reduce your digital connectivity

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to reducing or creating a boundary with your digital life. But as it happens, sometimes suggestions on how to go about it have to be spread online.

Influencers are posting about their "analog bag," a canvas bag filled with craft supplies or purchasing a refurbished iPod to participate in this trend.

The recommendation has increased the search for "iPods" on EBay more than 1,200 times an hour globally between January and October 2025, according to the company. The iPod third-generation models saw a 50 percent increase in average sales price from global EBay users in 2025 compared with 2023. The iPod Nano third generation saw a 60 percent increase, while the iPod Classic sixth generation had a 40 percent increase.

In terms of crafting, Market Research Future, a global market research company, is projecting the craft supplies market to steadily grow from $42.83 billion globally in 2025 to $64.95 billion by 2035 that's due in part to "individuals seeking creative outlets."

You don't have to spend money to participate in the analog lifestyle trend because making a drastic change or taking up a trendy hobby might not be helpful because it's not something you'll stick with long term, Khodayari said.

If you want to really stick with reducing your overall digital use, start with small adjustments to your habits, she said.

"Do something that makes a change that you really feel you can be consistent with," she said.

Here are some common small adjustments people make to their routines to live the analog lifestyle:

- Remove your phone from view when you're working on another task. Put it in a drawer or in another room entirely.
- Remove an app from your phone's home screen or delete it entirely.
- Mute or stop unnecessary notifications.
- Swap your doomscrolling time on social media with another activity such as a walk, a craft, reading or cooking.

Front lines of humor

Dark humor voices Ukrainians' hopes for victory

By NERINGA KLUMBYTE
Professor of Anthropology, Miami University; Lithuanian Institute of History (The Conversation)

In 1991, a simple line appeared in Broom, a Lithuanian satire and humor journal. "A shortest joke: Communism," it said. A one-liner to celebrate the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Four years since Russia's full-scale invasion, a shortest joke could be told about Russia's war in Ukraine: "Liberation."

Since the Russian Federation began its "special military operation" to "liberate" Ukrainians on Feb. 24, 2022, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, millions have fled their homes, cities have been destroyed, and water and land have been contaminated. But people in Ukraine still laugh. Laugh to overcome pain, express solidarity and resilience, and hope for the victory.

In the first two months of 2026, there have been over 200 attacks on energy infrastructure across Ukraine, damaging thermal and hydroelectric plants and causing prolonged electricity outages. Millions were left without power or with just a few hours of electricity. I asked my friend in Kyiv how she is holding up. She responded, "Organic matter survives better in cold."

I have studiedhumor in authoritarian and democratic states for many years. I have been fascinated by humor's power to overcome pain and liberate from absurdity and oppression. In Ukraine, war humor has mobilized people, expressed their resistance and helped them overcome daily hardships.

Dangerous jokes

Throughout history, satirists and cartoonists have faced punishment, prison and even executions. Lenin and Stalin, like Mao and Hitler, allowed no laughter at the expense of themselves or their regimes. The power of humor lies in its capacity to mobilize people for a common cause. It is a weapon of the powerful as well as the powerless.

In authoritarian states, official humor reinforces the state's political ideology and is a propaganda tool. Soviet satire and humor journals, for example, ridiculed Western imperialism. They satirized various ills of Western societies – high crime rates, unemployment, homelessness, corruption and poverty – while presenting the Soviet Union as more advanced.

Since 2022, many comedians have left Russia, some under threat. Like in Soviet times, anti-regime jokes can be told in kitchens and among friends but cannot freely circulate. In state media comedy shows, jokes about Putin are told from time to time, but they are used to bolster his image as a powerful, cunning leader, and hold up Russia as a great country.

War humor

In democratic societies, people are generally free to laugh at what they want. Ukrainian humor circulates from grassroots social media to government offices, to business sites. Since 2022, Ukrainian social media has been flooded by jokes – producing the biggest virtual humor archive in the history of wars.

But war humor is different from humor in times of peace. It can be hateful, obscene, grotesque, vulgar and dark. It fulfills many functions, from defense mechanism and survival strategy to a form of escape.

When lights went off in the winter of 2026, Ukrainians joked that even without light, they can see that "Putin is a 'khuylo'" – an obscene punch line. Some jokes noted that Ukrainians do not have electricity but have power; or that there is no electricity in Ukraine, but there is light – and there is no light in Russia.

War humor has also been a form of resistance and perseverance. After Putin's nuclear threats in 2022, memes about an orgy on Kyiv's Mount Shchekavitsa in the event of an "end of the world" began to spread online. People were invited to join in case they had unfulfilled sexual fantasies. Memes multiplied of a couple passionately kissing in the background of a nuclear mushroom cloud.

One young man, presumably one of 15,000 who signed up for the orgy on Telegram, told Radio Free Europe, "It's an attempt to show that the more they try to scare us, the more we will transform it into something else."

Similar groups popped up, including a group promoting an orgy on Odesa's Derybasivska Street. The orgy idea led to other forms of civic activism, such as the Soloma Cats charity foundation organizing first-aid training on Mount Shchekavitsa.

Laughing toward victory

Humor also is a form of news and commentary. Some people learn about international events, policy decisions and even battle victories from jokes rather than the mainstream media.

At the beginning of the war, internet memes laughed at European leaders' reluctance to supply arms to Ukraine. Billionaire Elon Musk was mocked in October 2022 after suggesting a plan for peace that would repeat elections in annexed regions, recognize Crimea as Russian territory and make Ukraine a neutral country. Even Pope Francis was laughed at for his March 2024 suggestion that Ukraine should wave "the white flag and negotiate" to save lives, which for Ukrainians meant surrendering their sovereignty.

During the Ukrainian army's counteroffensive in 2022, humor spread news of victories in Kherson, Bakhmut and other cities, laughing at Russian forces. Memes commonly portrayed Russian soldiers as incompetent, indoctrinated, or as zombies. Comparisons to Orcs in "The Lord of the Rings" were prominent, with one meme suggesting, "Stop calling Orcs Russians, it's offensive toward Orcs."

In response to reports of Russian soldiers stealing loot to sell in Belarussian open markets, Ukrainians created a meme of reselling captured Russian tanks at a "farmer's market." Another joke about Russian looting: "Did you take Kharkiv?" "No." "Kyiv?" "No." "What did you take?" "A washing machine, a mixer, and shoes …"

Some of the jokes provide commentary on global geopolitics, including Russia's propaganda that it had been threatened by NATO. "Did you hear? It turns out Russia is at war with NATO," one man asks. "How is it going for them?" asks another. "They already lost tens of thousands of soldiers and a ton of military equipment." "And NATO?" "Oh, they have not arrived yet."

In some ways, such jokes are a counteroffensive against Russian disinformation. In fact-checking, journalists fight propaganda with logical arguments, but propaganda targets emotions, identity and fears. Humor does not argue; it changes the context itself, subverting the message. And whereas fact-checking treats an opponent seriously, humor makes them ridiculous.

Ultimately, Ukrainians' laughter communicates resistance, solidarity and dedication to victory. In one joke, a husband asks his wife why she bought seven bottles of wine. What about water and preserves, in case the war drags on? The woman responds: "I am getting ready to celebrate the victory!"

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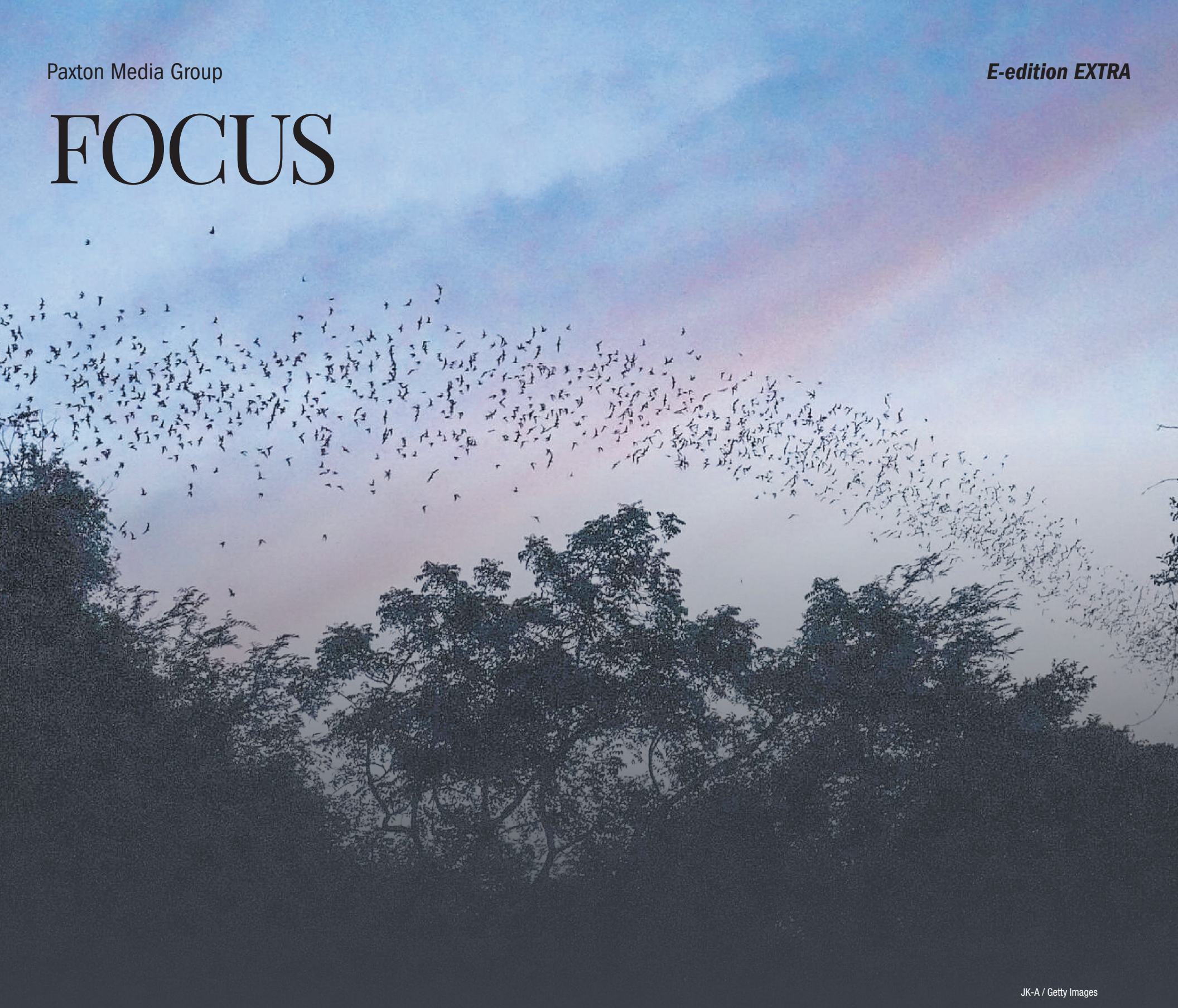

JK-A / Getty Images

Tiny recording backpacks reveal bats' surprising hunting strategy

By LEONIE BAIER
Postdoctoral Fellow in Behavioral Biology, Naturalis Biodiversity Center (The Conversation)

Deep into the Panamanian night, the forest hums with sound. Chirping insects form a steady backdrop, rain softly trickles from leaves. Somewhere above a stream, frogs call into the darkness.

But I am not there to see this scene.

It's already passed. What I hold now is a small, mud-smeared biologger, no larger than a Lego brick. This tag recorded the sounds of the previous night.

The evening before, my team and I had set nets outside the roosts – hollow trees or human-made structures such as tunnels or bunkers – where fringe-lipped bats (Trachops cirrhosus) sleep during the day. Under the faint glow of red headlamps, we weighed each bat we caught on its way out of the roost, checked its age and sex, and carefully glued a tiny tag to the fur between its shoulder blades.

When we released a tagged bat into the darkness, it vanished into the trees, carrying our recorder into the night.

Within a few days, the tags either fell off naturally or I gently removed them from recaptured bats with a quick trim of fur. Each biologger captured five to six hours of continuous sound and movement data – every flight, every attack, every crunch of prey bones between sharp teeth.

For the first time, I could follow a predator through the forest from its own point of view. And what those recordings revealed surprised me: Our fringe-lipped bats don't simply grab the first thing they detect. Instead, they stalk the forest's creatures with a patience and precision I hadn't expected.

Tiny tags for tiny hunters

I'm a behavioral ecologist, and fringe-lipped bats have been part of my scientific life for years, through my work with animal behavior researcher Rachel Page at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. In our recent study published in the journal Current Biology, we paired decades of field knowledge with miniature biologging technology, allowing us to accompany the bats through the night.

When I plug a tag into my laptop, I follow that journey in sound and movement. Through my headphones, I hear a familiar note. A túngara frog (Engystomops pustulosus) calls; that distinctive "whiiiiine-chuck-chuck" I know so well.

On my screen, the line charting the bat's motions stirs: a tremor of movement, then a sharp burst of wingbeats. At the same time, the audio trace fills with a rapid series of ultrasonic echolocation calls, the staccato sound of a hunter steering through darkness. In my ears, a rush of air surges past the tiny microphone, then there's a splash, more wingbeats, and finally the faint, wet crunching of teeth. A few minutes later, it's over.

The bat has eaten the frog. I smile; we've studied this bat for so many years, the data matches what we have observed in the laboratory. But now, for the first time, I can hear how the hunt unfolds in the wild.

I scroll further in my recording.

A new sequence begins, but this time there are no frog calls. No sound to guide a strike. Just a sudden rush of air, a violent rustling, and then the unmistakable sounds of a fight thrash through my headphones: wings flapping, claws scraping, and the harsh cries of a prey animal fighting to survive.

Eventually – silence.

For a long moment, I hear only the sounds of the forest. Then again, the beat of wings. The bat is flying once more. It lands. And then comes that telltale sound again – slow, steady and deliberate. The bat is eating its catch.

Five minutes pass. Ten. Twenty. The chewing stops. The motion trace falls flat. As the night drifts on, nothing moves. The bat has fallen asleep.

Much later, the silence breaks. A quick shudder, a few brief pulses of echolocation: The bat is awake again. But it doesn't fly off. It starts chewing again. And again. In the end, I count a total of 84 minutes of chewing, spread out across several bouts. Whatever this tiny bat caught, it was nothing like the quick frog meal I'd heard before.

Size of predator usually matches size of prey

In the animal kingdom, size usually dictates strategy.

Large lions, wolves and polar bears chase prey nearly their own size, at enormous costs: hours of stalking, bursts of sprinting and long fasts between meals. Their energy reserves let them weather failure after failure until finally a single successful kill restores the balance.

Small predators live by different rules. The tiny bodies of weasels, shrews and bats burn energy so fast that skipping even one meal can mean starvation. For bats, the demands of powered flight push those costs even higher. So they hunt small, abundant prey: quick, low-cost meals that keep the metabolic fire burning.

On average, the bats we tracked made around seven attacks per night and succeeded roughly half the time. Hearing that more-than-one-hour-long chewing episode recorded on the biologger left me astonished. Was this individual bat just an exceptionally slow eater? Or had it taken down something very large?

To find out, I turned to a feeding experiment I had run in captivity, where I measured how long bats chewed prey of known weights. That calibration allowed me to translate chewing time in the wild into meal size. I discovered that most prey weighed around 2 grams, about 7 percent of a bat's body mass. But some meals were far larger, reaching up to 30 grams – nearly the bat's own weight.

How can a creature so small, with so little energy to spare, afford to hunt like a lion?

Listening to dinner

Our bats' style of hunting is close to that of lions or polar bears, but the efficiency of their hunts sets the bats apart from any large predator. After leaving the roost at dusk, they spent just over five minutes flying in total before making their first attack. So rather than spending the whole night in search on the wing, they flew only about 11 percent of the time – less than half an hour over five hours of recording.

How could they find their meals so quickly? The answer lies in their extraordinary ears.

Fringe-lipped bats are masters of acoustic espionage. Instead of using echolocation alone to detect their prey, they eavesdrop on the sounds that frogs and other animals make. A túngara frog's distinctive "tuuuuungara," for example, carries through the forest and serves as a perfect beacon for a hungry bat.

Our recordings show that attacks were eight to 12 times more likely when frog calls were present. Strikes launched from flight clustered near loud choruses, while nearly all attacks from perches occurred in silence.

The bats have a dual ambush strategy. They launch strikes from the air when prey are advertising themselves. When the forest falls quiet, they hang almost motionless from branches to listen for subtler cues, sweeping the scene with their large ears before swooping down onto their prey.

By alternating between active flight and patient perch hunting, they minimize effort and maximize success.

Learning to thrive in a changing world

Fringe-lipped bats have solved the small-predator dilemma by hunting large prey – such as frogs, lizards, birds or rodents – with remarkably little effort.

But not every bat we tracked was equally efficient. Adults tackled a wider range of prey, while juveniles focused only on smaller, more manageable meals – likely smaller frogs, grasshoppers and dragonflies. This variation suggests that experience plays a major role.

Fringe-lipped bats are long-lived – some over 14 years – and have exceptional memories. They can learn new prey sounds by trial and error, or even by observing other bats. Over a lifetime, a bat refines its strategy, becoming more selective in its choice of prey. In this way, it seems that its hunting success is not just a product of anatomy or instinct – it's also a story of cognitive evolution.

The bats' success, however, depends on a thriving forest. As amphibians face global declines from disease, habitat loss and climate change, the bats' longevity gives them some time to respond and learn, offering hope that these extraordinary predators can persist even as ecosystems change – if we work to keep their forests alive.

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FOCUS

Are heroes *born* or *made*?

Role models and training can prepare ordinary people to take heroic action

By CATHERINE A. SANDERSON
Poler Family Professor of Psychology, Amherst College (The Conversation)

Three young Americans – Anthony Sadler, Alek Skarlatos and Spencer Stone – successfully tackled a gunman on a train in France, saving passengers.

The journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna reported on Ukrainian citizens held unlawfully by Russia; she was captured and died in detention in Russia.

Welles Crowther, often known as the "man in the red bandana," was a 24-year-old equities trader who guided numerous people in the South Tower on 9/11 to safety before ultimately dying when the tower collapsed.

All of these people are clearly heroes. They engaged in courageous behavior – and risked physical peril – to benefit others or in service of a broader moral cause.

Psychologists like medescribe heroes as people who take some type of intentional action to help other people, even when they may experience a personal cost for doing so. As Stanford psychology professor Phil Zimbardo put it, heroism involves taking a personal risk for the common good.

In some cases, people who take these risks experience potentially negative social consequences such as disapproval, ostracism and career setbacks. I describe people who show moral courage, meaning they are willing to speak up even when they may incur such costs, as moral rebels. Moral rebels are willing to take actions like tell a bully to cut it out, call out a friend who uses a racist slur, or report a colleague who engages in corporate fraud.

But when people think about heroism, they often focus on physical courage, such as jumping into a frozen pond to rescue a drowning child, leaping onto subway tracks to help someone who has fallen, or grabbing a gun from a shooter. What enables someone to engage in this type of physically risky – even life-threatening – behavior?

The characteristics of a hero

People tend to think of heroesas having particular traits: fearlessness, bravery, strength and altruism, along with selflessness, wisdom and resilience. Does the empirical research match up with that common conception?

Researchers in one study compared personality traits among three different groups of non-Jewish adults who lived during the time of the Holocaust: those who had rescued at least one Jewish person, those who had provided no help, and those who left Europe before the start of World War II. Their findings provide clear evidence that heroes stand out in important ways.

People who risked their own lives to help Jewish people scored higher on risk-taking, meaning they felt more comfortable with danger. They also scored higher on independence and perceived control; they felt comfortable making a decision and then taking action. They also rated higher in traits expressing concern about others, including altruism, empathy and social responsibility.

Although the Holocaust is obviously a unique situation, other research on heroic behavior reveals a similar constellation of traits. For example, one study compared the traits of people who had received the Canadian Medal of Bravery – a national award given to people who have risked their own lives to save another person – to a control group of people who were similar in demographic characteristics. The researchers found that people who engaged in heroism shared particular traits, including greater confidence in their ability to act, a stronger ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes, and more positive feelings toward other people.

These findings reveal that heroism is at least in part determined by who you are, and that it's not just a single trait that matters. People who engage in various types of bravery tend to show a particular combination of traits. They feel comfortable taking action even when it involves danger and they feel compassion for other people.

The power of modeling

Although some people may have a greater predisposition to heroism based on their personality, situational factors also play a key role in inspiring heroic behavior.

One study by sociologists examined what motivated members of the majority Hutu population to risk their own lives to help members of the Tutsi population during the 1984 genocide in Rwanda. This analysis of in-depth interviews with people who reported saving at least one person from this violence – often by hiding someone in their own home – identified several key factors predicting their behavior.

First, one of the strongest predictors of whether people helped refugees was having parents or grandparents who had done so during previous episodes of violence in their country. As one man noted, he chose to act because of "what my parents had done in previous years." People who have seen physical courage modeled by others are more likely to act in heroic ways.

This is strikingly similar to what motivated heroism in Nazi Germany. Historian Mark Klempner's study of Dutch people who rescued Jewish children revealed that nearly all reported having a parent or relative who had consistently gone out of their way to help other people in different contexts.

Perhaps not surprisingly, religious beliefs also played a role in motivating heroic behavior during the Rwandan genocide. More than half of those in the study who rescued people mentioned the role that their faith played in this decision.

The third factor motivating this type of heroic behavior was social ties. People were far more likely to help friends or neighbors. These personal connections likely fostered greater empathy for people in need, which in turn motivated action, even when doing so created considerable risk.

The role of training

Although people with particular personality traits may have an easier time being brave, as do those whose relatives who modeled such behavior, heroism can also be acquired through training, which is good news for us all. People who take CPR classes, for example, know they have the skills necessary to step up during health emergencies and are therefore more likely to do so.

Two of those three American men who stopped a man with an assault rifle on a train had some type of military training; one served in the Air Force, and another served in the National Guard. Military training is designed precisely to help people become brave – so they can take action, even at great personal risk.

Realizing that heroes can be built through training led psychology researcher Phil Zimbardo to create the Heroic Imagination Project, which focuses on helping people develop the skills needed to step up and act heroically – whether defending what's right in a work meeting or intervening with a bully at school. For example, children who participate in heroism training become more courageous, suggesting that anyone can learn to be braver.

Most importantly, this approach is based in the belief that heroism does not require a unique set of personality traits; instead, heroism occurs when ordinary people choose to step up in dangerous situations, even when doing so involves considerable risk.

As Matt Langdon, the executive director of the Heroic Imagination Project, notes, "the opposite of a hero is not a villain, but a bystander."

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FOCUS

Photos by Elizabeth Robertson / The Philadelphia Inquirer / TNS

Brendan McClanahan (from left) of Havertown; Evan Chester of Southampton; Clay Herron of Dover, Del.; Edwin Roth of Conshohocken; and Joe Geibler of Folsom have a spirited exchange during a Scrabble group meetup at Riddle Village in Media on Feb. 12.

This is where some of the country's best Scrabble players meet and compete

By ABIGAIL COVINGTON and EARL HOPKINS
The Philadelphia Inquirer (TNS)

PHILADELPHIA — South Philly's Mark Abadi has had a way with word games since he was old enough to pick up a Scrabble board.

By 10, he would complete large-print mini games and crossword puzzles, and started playing Scrabble against his parents.

He became what he calls a "word nerd," obsessing over newly-learned words and trying out new strategies in hotly-contested Scrabble battles at home.

"I could never compete with my parents," he joked. His parents always matched his competitive spirit.

Eventually, he lost interest in the game until, at 15, he found his childhood Scrabble board and began playing again. Only this time, he had spent days studying the Scrabble dictionary, which made him better equipped to out-point his parents.

"I looked through the [dictionary] pages, and was like, 'Oh my God, that's a word? You can play 'A'a' because it's a kind of lava? What?'"

Abadi, a copy editor at Business Insider, found immediate inspiration reading the 2001 "Word Freak" by Stefan Fatsis, a journalist who explored the underground Scrabble community and became an expert-level player. Soon, he'd follow Fatsis' footsteps and become a nationally-ranked Scrabble player.

For nearly two decades, Abadi, 35, has competed in tournaments throughout the country. He's won regional matches and scored top five finishes in world-class competitions, including the North American Scrabble Championship.

The Montgomery County native has continued to sharpen his skills by rubbing shoulders with other world-class players, many of who are (like Abadi) members of the local group, the Delco Scrabble Club.

"I casually hop on SEPTA and then I'm face-to-face with the best Scrabble players in the country. It's kind of intimidating," he said.

'We're waiting for you'

The Riddle Village dining room was pin-drop quiet on a recent evening, save for the occasional shaking of Scrabble tiles. The Delco Scrabble Club had gathered at the assisted living facility, where one of their oldest members lived, for their weekly meeting.

When The Inquirer got there, the members were halfway through their first of five 50-minute games.

Will Anderson, a 41-year-old national Scrabble champion, reached into the black drawstring bag suspended above his head and plucked a plastic tile. "We do this as a courtesy to our opponents," he said, glancing at the bag. "So you aren't doing any shenanigans when you're drawing."

Unlike Abadi, Anderson did not grow up playing Scrabble. He started as an adult, partly to break a "World of Warcraft" addiction. That was in 2009.

Since then, he's won multiple tournaments and become an online Scrabble celebrity of sorts. After building an audience on Twitch, he turned to YouTube, where he currently has 70,000 subscribers and regularly posts "Scrabble History" videos detailing legendary games and players.

Will Anderson picks his tiles from the bag while playing Scrabble during a Scrabble group meetup at Riddle Village in Media on Feb. 12.

Jeff Jacobson of Philadelphia (left) ponders his next move while playing Scrabble with Samuel Moch of Philadelphia (right) during a Scrabble group meetup at Riddle Village in Media on Feb. 12.

"It's more growth than I ever could have imagined," Anderson said. His online following even led to his day job as a content producer at Scopely, the mobile gaming company behind the Scrabble app.

In Riddle Village, Anderson was playing two games at once because the group had an odd number of players. "We call it good Will and evil Will," said Samuel Moch, a top-10 player in Pennsylvania, also a club member. "And that's appropriate because I'm playing good Will and I'm beating him."

Meanwhile, "Evil Will" was facing Jeff Jacobson, a retired tuxedo salesman and another top player in the state, and winning.

Anderson, who lives in Aston, said part of the reason Philadelphia is home to so many strong Scrabble players may simply be its size.

"You have a higher chance of these unusual hobbies in urban areas," he said. Or perhaps, he added, the city's competitive sports culture spills over into word games. "There could be something to that."

The competitive scene also benefits from the fact that Scrabble is a universally known game. Almost everyone learns it at home, as did several members of the Delco Scrabble Club.

They grew up playing with friends and relatives, got so good that nobody around them could beat them, and began looking for tougher opponents.

"If you're that person in your family," Anderson said, "we're waiting for you with open arms."

At the Delco Scrabble Club, it quickly becomes clear that Scrabble has more in common with chess than it does with word games.

"As a tournament player, you realize how deep and how beautiful the strategy of Scrabble is," Anderson explained. "And in your pursuit of playing better and better, you leave the word game part of it behind and embrace it as a strategy game."

Often, players don't even know the definitions of the words they play.

Evan Chester, the fifth-best player in Pennsylvania and one of the top 50 players in the country, doesn't know the definition of unaus, the word he had put down in the Riddle Village game. He knows it because he memorized the dictionary.

"But it's a very useful and playable word," said the 22-year-old.

"It's a two-toed sloth," said fellow club member, Brendan McClanahan. Other club members, like de facto leader Ed Roth, who has been hosting the club at his house regularly for six years, nodded in agreement.

"Yup, two-toed sloth," he said as he laid down the word decrial.

Delco to TV

The Delco Scrabble Club will soon draw the attention of national TV audiences. Abadi and Anderson are competing on CW's "Scrabble" game show, hosted by comedian and former late-night show host Craig Ferguson.

Last summer, Abadi submitted an application to audition for the game show. And after meeting with the casting director, was invited to compete in London for the show's $10,000 prize.

Abadi scored a win and will advance to future episodes of the show.

"I put my fist up and clapped and everything," he said. "I was way more peppy than I am in real life, to be honest."

Anderson, who applied to audition after a show producer reached out to him on YouTube, won't appear until the tail-end of the season in August. He was equally enthusiastic during his run.

"I kicked up the hooting and hollering far beyond my norm," he said. And while he was nervous in the lead-up to the game, "when it came to actually playing Scrabble," he said, "the muscle memory kicked in, and it just became fun again."

Anderson and Abadi signed NDAs preventing them from discussing their performance, but both said winning wasn't their main goal. Abadi wanted to "have fun" and represent the Philly and Scrabble communities well, which he thinks he did. Anderson just hopes his appearance on the show is entertaining for viewers.

Through the show, Abadi is hopeful more people are drawn to the iconic board game. It's not just a "vocabulary contest," or a "game made for grandparents," he said, adding there's "something for everyone to appreciate about it."

HEALTH

There aren't enough geriatricians

Getty Images

Here's how older adults can still get the right care

THE CONVERSATION

By JERRY GURWITZ
UMass Chan Medical School (The Conversation)

More than 70 million baby boomers – those born between 1946 and 1964 – are alive today. In 2026, the oldest of them are turning 80.

With longer lives often comes more complicated health needs: multiple chronic conditions, long lists of medications, balance problems that can increase the risk of falls, and changes in memory. Many older adults also begin relying more on spouses, children or other family members to help manage medical decisions.

Ideally, health care in later life should go beyond just treating individual diseases and medical conditions. It should aim to help older people maintain health, independence and optimal quality of life for as long as possible.

Doctors and nurse practitioners trained in geriatrics specialize in doing exactly that. As a geriatrician for nearly four decades, I've seen how the right care for older people can prevent falls, reduce risk of medication side effects and help patients make medical decisions that reflect their goals and wishes.

The problem? There just aren't enough of us. Finding a health care provider with expertise in geriatrics can be extraordinarily difficult. But there's good news: You can use a few simple strategies that geriatricians rely on to have more productive conversations with your or your family member's doctor.

A whole-person approach to aging

Geriatricians are trained to see the bigger picture of aging. They don't just treat individual diseases – they also focus on preserving independence, function and safety. That includes addressing memory changes, balance problems, complex medication regimens and the difficult trade-offs that often come with complicated medical decisions.

A geriatrician can help patients and their families weigh whether a test or procedure will truly improve their patient's life. Specialists in geriatrics know that most falls have multiple causes – and that practical steps like reviewing medications or improving home safety can prevent the next one.

They also recognize that in older adults, new symptoms should not be blamed simply on aging. Sometimes they can be due to drug side effects. For example, stopping certain sleep medications can reduce confusion and daytime drowsiness, and limiting or avoiding use of opioids for pain relief can prevent debilitating constipation.

Unfortunately, geriatrics is a specialty with a dearth of providers. Nationally, there are fewer than 12 geriatric physicians and 10 geriatric nurse practitioners per 100,000 older Americans. In many rural areas, there are none. And the shortage is unlikely to improve anytime soon. That's because medical students and advanced practice nurses rarely choose to specialize in geriatrics, and many medical schools provide no formal training in the care of older adults.

This means most older adults will be cared for by clinicians without specialized geriatric training. But older patients and families can still steer care in the right direction by using a straightforward framework geriatricians follow called the "5Ms."

A geriatrician's framework

This mnemonic captures the core principles of optimal geriatric care. The letters stand for mind, mobility, medications, multicomplexity and matters most. The importance of each of these essentials of care for older adults may seem obvious, but it's amazing how often they are overlooked when doctors without training in geriatrics take care of their older patients. Here's how you can think about them in speaking with your doctor:

MIND: About 10 percent of adults age 65 and older have dementia, and another 22 percent have mild cognitive impairment. If you've noticed changes in your memory – forgetting appointments or conversations, forgetting to take medications, struggling with bills or relying more on family for help with tasks you once handled easily – bring it to your doctor's attention. These concerns don't always surface unless you mention them. When doctors know about memory problems, they can check for treatable causes, adjust medications or recommend further evaluation and lifestyle changes that may be of benefit.

MOBILITY: Each year, about a third of older adults report at least one fall, and 1 in 10 suffer a fall-related injury. Make sure to tell your health care provider if you have fallen, feel unsteady when standing or walking, or if you worry about falling. Request advice about how you can improve strength, flexibility and balance to reduce the risk of falls and serious injury.

MEDICATIONS: Four out of every 10 Americans age 65 and older take five or more different medications every day, and 1 in 10 take 10 or more. Any new symptom in an older person could be due to a drug side effect of their medication. So don't be afraid to ask whether every medication you are taking is absolutely necessary, or whether a new symptom you are experiencing might be a side effect. If you see multiple health care providers who each prescribe medications to you, ask for a comprehensive review of your medications to make certain that nothing is being missed and all your drugs and dosages are appropriate.

MULTICOMPLEXITY: About 75 percent of older adults live with two or more chronic medical conditions. When you are followed by several specialists – who limit their focus to a single disease – your care can become fragmented. That often means long medication lists, frequent tests and recommendations that don't always fit together. A whole-person approach looks at how everything connects. You and your family can help by asking your primary health care provider to step back and review the full picture – all medications, all specialists and any upcoming tests – and help coordinate a clear, organized plan that is best for you.

MATTERS MOST: Asking yourself to pin down what matters most to you is a simple but powerful way to help your doctors understand what to prioritize in thinking through your care. With that information, your doctor can look beyond focusing on any one disease or condition and instead work with you to support your personal goals for a good old age. Maybe it's being able to walk to the mailbox without falling. Or staying in your own home for as long as possible. Or avoiding medications that make you sleepy or confused. Or staying out of hospitals and emergency rooms. Whatever it is, it's important to have your health care provider focus on your own priorities.

Aging well is not about having more doctor's appointments or medical tests, nor is it about taking more medications. It's about getting the kind of health care that will maintain function, independence and quality of life into old age. You may not be able to find a geriatrician, but you can definitely help your doctor better understand the care that's right for you or your loved one.

Jerry Gurwitz is a professor of geriatrics at UMass Chan Medical School.

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Expert says whether to take antidepressants during pregnancy is a 'risk-risk conversation'

Dreamstime / TNS

By KAYLA YUP
The Philadelphia Inquirer (TNS)

When Sarah Bynum was pregnant with her first child in 2017, her primary care doctor suggested she stop taking her antidepressant.

He told her there wasn't enough research to justify staying on the medication.

By the time she delivered her daughter, the Delaware County woman's anxiety was so bad that she decided never again to go through a pregnancy without her antidepressant.

Bynum, who has taken medication for anxiety since she was a teenager, is one of the nearly 18 percent of women in the U.S. on an antidepressant. She takes a drug known as an SSRI, the most common class of antidepressants, which medical societies generally consider safe to use during pregnancy.

Still, roughly half of women taking an antidepressant discontinue their use of the medication while pregnant, according to a 2025 study in the medical journal JAMA Network Open.

Kelly Zafman, an OB-GYN at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, decided to research the issue that has also recently been under discussion on the federal level. She's observed that patients often get mixed-messaging from providers.

"The other side of the conversation that gets missed is this risk of not continuing medications," said Zafman, who is in her final year of fellowship training in maternal-fetal medicine.

Preliminary findings from her research showed the risk of a mental health emergency nearly doubled in women who discontinued SSRIs or SNRIs (another popular type of antidepressant), compared to those who stayed on their medication. She presented the unpublished results this month at the meeting of the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine.

The analysis used data from 1,462 privately insured Pennsylvania women with active antidepressant prescriptions who gave birth between 2023 and 2024. While pregnant, 81 percent of them stopped or interrupted usage.

Zafman said the highly personal decision comes down to factors such as the patient's prior pregnancies, mental health history, and how well-controlled their symptoms are.

Ultimately, the potential risks have to be weighed against those of untreated depression or anxiety.

"It's really a risk-risk conversation," Zafman said.

Evolving research

The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists discourages discontinuing antidepressants based on pregnancy alone, highlighting the risks of untreated mental health conditions. Studies have linked uncontrolled depression during pregnancy with preterm birth, low birth weight, higher suicide risk, and impaired mother-infant attachment.

Research on the safety of antidepressants in pregnancy continues to evolve. Some potential risks identified in older research appear overstated when compared with more recent, better-designed studies, Zafman said.

She cited as an example a rare but serious condition called persistent pulmonary hypertension – which causes a breathing issue – for which scientific evidence remains conflicting.

"There's definitely an association, but it's not totally clear how causative it is," Zafman said.

Another concern, neonatal adaptation syndrome, tends to involve mild difficulties with feeding and breathing that resolve within days. Medical intervention is rarely required, and the treatment essentially is to cuddle and feed your baby, Zafman said.

While antidepressants potentially pose risks in pregnancy, she said, overall, the risks of long lasting effects are "extraordinarily low."

A personal decision

Bynum, a patient at Penn Medicine, was not on antidepressants during her first pregnancy. (She was not part of this particular study but has participated in other research with Zafman.)

Five months into the pregnancy, she learned her daughter would be born with a congenital heart defect that would require monitoring, and later, surgery.

Family and friends tried to help her, but they weren't able to calm her heightened anxiety the way her medication usually would.

When she became pregnant with her second child, she knew she wanted to have a "more mentally healthy pregnancy."

"I needed to be mentally and physically present not just for myself, but my daughter," she said.

She asked her OB-GYNs if she could continue on her antidepressant, Paxil. They weren't sure.

She turned to the fetal heart experts at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, who looked into the medical evidence and told her it was fine to continue taking her antidepressant.

Bynum has since had three healthy pregnancies while taking the antidepressant.

She felt it was the right decision.

"I need to focus on having a healthy pregnancy with as minimal stress as possible," Bynum said. "And if that means taking a medication, that's what's gonna work."

The postpartum experience: Recognizing complications

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

Postpartum experiences are as unique as the pregnancies that come before them. Because of this, it can be difficult to recognize what's normal and what could be a complication – even if you've given birth before.

The postpartum period is generally defined as the first six weeks after birth. "Postpartum begins immediately following birth and extends through the time when your body and mind are recovering from pregnancy and delivery," says Dr. Kylie Cooper, a maternal-fetal medicine specialist at Mayo Clinic.

Recovery isn't the same for everyone, and for some people, the postpartum timeline can be longer. While the spectrum of what is considered typical postpartum is wide, there are warning signs of complications you should never ignore.

Dr. Cooper discusses postpartum complications, how to recognize them and when to seek care.

The signs you shouldn't ignore

Dr. Cooper says consistent improvement is the best indicator of typical recovery: "In general, recovery should tend toward improvement. So, if you feel like things are getting worse, or new symptoms come up, we definitely want you to reach out for care."

The first two weeks after delivery carry the highest risk for serious complications, though they can sometimes occur later. "The most common complications we see in that time frame are high blood pressure, hemorrhage or bleeding complications, infection, anxiety and postpartum depression," says Dr. Cooper.

While many postpartum concerns are common and treatable, some rare but serious complications can develop during this time, which is why new or worsening symptoms should never be ignored.

"These include blood clots, like deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism, as well as postpartum heart issues like cardiomyopathy," says Dr. Cooper.

If you experience any of these symptoms, you should seek care as soon as possible because they can indicate serious complications:

- Worsening pelvic or incision pain, or pain that doesn't improve.
- New, heavy or increased bleeding.
- Headaches that don't improve with medication.
- Confusion or behavior changes.
- Fever or flu-like symptoms.
- Mood changes, anxiety or depression.
- Extreme fatigue that doesn't improve with rest.
- Shortness of breath, trouble breathing or chest pain.

"Symptoms related to pain, mood changes and energy levels can be dismissed as normal postpartum symptoms. While the postpartum time frame can be a challenging time, these symptoms shouldn't be dismissed," says Dr. Cooper.

Mental health-related postpartum complications

After delivery, your body undergoes a significant hormonal shift that can affect your mood and emotions in various ways. While this is expected, symptoms usually improve in a couple of weeks. When these feelings linger or cause depression or anxiety that doesn't improve, it could indicate postpartum depression. In rare cases, a serious and life-threatening condition called postpartum psychosis can develop.

"While 'baby blues' might initially cause people to feel off or be tearful, that should improve, and it should not persist," says Dr. Cooper.

She says these feelings can improve with treatment and support.

If you think you or a loved one are experiencing symptoms of mental health-related postpartum complications, the National Maternal Mental Health Hotline (1-833-TLC-MAMA) and Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (988) offer free and confidential 24/7 resources.

After the six-week postpartum visit

After your six-week postpartum visit, your care will transition back to your primary care team. But this shouldn't mean the end of postpartum care.

"It's becoming increasingly recognized that this is a much longer process, extending up to a year after delivery. I think it's important that we acknowledge that many people are not done recovering at the six-week mark – not by a long shot," says Dr. Cooper.

If you had physical or mental health complications during the postpartum period, this transition is crucial to ensure your long-term wellness. "This is a really important time frame to ensure we help patients establish their preventive care because pregnancy complications can impact long-term health," says Dr. Cooper.

As you continue to monitor your health and well-being during this period, it's important to pay attention to symptoms that may arise or persist beyond the initial recovery phase, as these can often be treated. "Pelvic floor symptoms are often dismissed. For example, there's this misnomer that once you have children, you will have pelvic floor issues. And that's an accepted part of your future, but it shouldn't be," says Dr. Cooper. "These are issues that can be treated and improved."

Getting the support you need postpartum

Support plays an important role in recognizing postpartum complications. Partners, family members and caregivers may notice subtle changes before you do, especially during a time marked by sleep deprivation and physical recovery.

"Sometimes partners or family members are the first to recognize that something isn't right," says Dr. Cooper. "If you notice changes that concern you about your loved one, it's important to speak up and help them seek care."

Dr. Cooper emphasizes that it takes a village to provide postpartum support, and the fetal and maternal care team at Mayo Clinic aims to be part of that village. "In our practice, we have a team approach with obstetric providers, perinatal mood specialists, lactation consultants and pelvic floor physical therapists, and we all work together to make sure that the patient has the care they need."

MAYO CLINIC MINUTE

Using combined therapy to treat obesity

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

Research shows that metabolic surgery and GLP-1 medications are both effective therapies for treating obesity. Medications typically result in a 10 percent loss of body weight in a real-world setting, while surgery can achieve more dramatic results, up to 25 percent to 30 percent.

Metabolic experts at Mayo Clinic say combining the two in some instances can be an effective way to treat obesity.

"Obesity is a disease, and to overcome it, we need to use all the modalities, or tools, we have available," says Dr. Omar Ghanem, a Mayo Clinic metabolic surgeon.

However, it's not a one-size-fits-all approach.

"Some patients might benefit only from medications, some patients might benefit only from surgery, but a portion of patients might benefit from the combined therapy," Dr. Ghanem says.

He says some patients experience greater weight loss when combining bariatric surgery, also called metabolic surgery, with GLP-1 medications. Ideal candidates include patients who start obesity treatment with a higher body mass index, those who are preparing to undergo a complex surgical procedure, such as a transplant, and patients who need to lose more weight for their overall health or those looking to maintain their weight after metabolic surgery.

"Neither GLP-1s nor bariatric surgery are magic. These are tools, and the patient has to use those tools correctly to be able to overcome obesity," Dr. Ghanem says. "Each case is different. Go to your provider, talk to your specialist, and trust them to help you make the right decision for your health. Our patients have to put a lot of effort to overcome the disease. They're not just choosing the easy way out, they're choosing the healthy way out."

MAYO CLINIC Q&A

Is my racing heart an arrhythmia?

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I've noticed that sometimes my heart races or skips a beat. What causes this? Is there treatment for it?

ANSWER: What you're experiencing may be an abnormal heart rhythm, also known as an arrhythmia. Arrhythmias fall into two categories: too fast or too slow. A racing heart or a skipped beat typically falls into the "too fast" category. When an abnormal heartbeat interrupts the normal rhythm, you may feel palpitations – sensations that your heart is racing, fluttering, skipping a beat – or a sense of panic. Often these symptoms are more noticeable at night or when lying down.

In younger people, typically those in their 20s to 50s, the heart may suddenly speed up from a normal rate to 180-200 beats per minute. This rapid heartbeat can cause lightheadedness, dizziness, anxiety or, in some cases, fainting.

Fast or skipped heartbeats can originate in either the upper or lower chambers of the heart. Those that begin in the top chamber are called premature atrial contractions (PACs), while those starting in the bottom chambers are premature ventricular contractions (PVCs). Although they can feel alarming, PACs and PVCs generally aren't dangerous or life-threatening. They don't cause heart attacks, strokes or increase the risk of death.

These irregular heartbeats may be caused by:

- An abnormal electric circuit that people are born with.
- Thyroid disorders.
- Hormonal changes related to pregnancy or menopause.
- Excessive caffeine or alcohol consumption.

If symptoms are infrequent and don't interfere with daily activities, people often learn to live with them. However, if they become bothersome, medication may help suppress the extra heartbeats.

One way to slow a sudden racing heart is by performing a vagal maneuver, which can help interrupt the abnormal rhythm. Vagal maneuvers include bearing down like you are having a bowel movement, blowing into a straw with one end closed, clearing your ears as you might on an airplane, dipping your face in ice-cold water or taking a cold shower.

Evaluation

However, these are temporary fixes. If symptoms persist, patients may be referred for further evaluation, such as an electrophysiology study and possible catheter ablation. During this procedure, catheters are threaded through veins in the groin and guided to the heart. Doctors use specialized wires to find where the arrhythmia is coming from. Then energy is delivered via the catheter to eliminate the abnormal circuit.

Ablation is usually done under twilight sedation and typically is a same-day procedure. Patients need someone with them for 24 hours, should avoid driving for 24 hours and shouldn't lift anything heavy for a week to let the groin incisions heal. After that, they can resume their normal activities.

PACs and PVCs are most common in younger people. For older adults, the most common fast rhythm is atrial fibrillation (AFib) or atrial flutter. These are different types of heart rhythms which become increasingly common with age.

AFib can cause irregular heartbeat, palpitations, chest discomfort, lightheadedness, dizziness, fatigue and sometimes passing out. Some people have no symptoms, and the condition is discovered during routine care or procedures.

Common causes of AFib include untreated sleep apnea, excessive caffeine, binge drinking or overconsumption of alcohol, thyroid disorders, and hormonal changes. In a small group of patients, spicy foods may trigger AFib.

Treatment for AFib

Treatment options include:

- Medication to control fast heart rate.
- Medication to control heart rhythm.
- Catheter ablation.

Ablation for AFib is done under general anesthesia. It's a minimally invasive procedure in which doctors access the heart through the groin and target areas on the left side of the heart responsible for triggering or sustaining the abnormal rhythm. Traditionally, two types of energy – radiofrequency (heat) and cryoablation (cold) – have been used for ablation.

Most recently, a new, nonthermal option – pulsed field ablation – has been introduced. This energy source selectively targets heart muscle cells. This reduces the risk of serious or life-threatening damage to the surrounding structures, such as the esophagus and the phrenic nerve, which controls the diaphragm and breathing.

Recovery after ablation is similar regardless of the energy source used, including about one week of limited activity.

During AFib, blood can pool in the heart, form clots and cause a stroke. Depending on individual risk factors, patients are often prescribed a blood thinner once they're diagnosed with atrial fibrillation or atrial flutter, even after undergoing ablation. If they're not able to tolerate blood thinners, a permanent device may be implanted in their heart to seal off the left atrial appendage, where most clots form, to reduce the risk of stroke.

If you're experiencing a racing heart, noticing skipped beats or symptoms of an irregular heart rhythm, consult with your healthcare professional or a cardiologist to determine whether further evaluation or treatment is needed.

– Divya Korpu, M.B.B.S., Cardiovascular Medicine, Mayo Clinic Health System, Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Jackie Molloy for KFF Health News / TNS

Sadia Zapp, a communications director in New York, is one of millions of Americans to start taking an anxiety medication in recent years. "It's really helped me manage," she says.

As more Americans embrace anxiety treatment, MAHA derides medications

By PHILLIP REESE
KFF Health News (TNS)

After a grueling year of chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation to treat breast cancer, Sadia Zapp was anxious – not the manageable hum that had long been part of her life, but something deeper, more distracting.

"Every little ache, like my knee hurts," she said, made her worry that "this is the end of the road for me."

So Zapp, a 40-year-old communications director in New York, became one of millions of Americans to start taking an anxiety medication in recent years. For her, it was the serotonin-boosting drug Lexapro.

"I love it. It's been great," she said. "It's really helped me manage."

The proportion of American adults who took anxiety medications jumped from 11.7 percent in 2019 to 14.3 percent in 2024, with most of the increase occurring during the covid pandemic, according to survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's 8 million more people, bringing the total to roughly 38 million, with sharp increases among young adults, people with a college degree, and adults who identify as LGBTQ+.

Even as psychiatric medications gain public acceptance and become easier to access through telehealth appointments, the rise of a class of antidepressants called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, known as SSRIs, has triggered a backlash from supporters of the "Make America Healthy Again" movement who argue they are harmful. Doctors and researchers say medications such as Prozac, Zoloft, and Lexapro are front-line treatments for many anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder, and are being misrepresented as addictive and broadly harmful even though they've been proved safe for extended use.

Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has decried broadening SSRI use. During his Jan. 29 confirmation hearing, he said he knows people, including family members, who had a tougher time quitting SSRIs than people have quitting heroin. More recently, he said his agency is studying a possible link between the use of SSRIs and other psychiatric medications and violent behavior like school shootings.

Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Marty Makary has also suggested that SSRI use among pregnant women could lead to poor birth outcomes.

SSRIs' common side effects include upset stomach, brain fog, and fatigue. Some SSRIs also can reduce libido and cause other sexual side effects.

For many people, however, the side effects are mild and tolerable and the benefits of treating chronic anxiety are worth it, said Patrick Kelly, president of the Southern California Psychiatric Society. "The statements about SSRIs were just not grounded in any sort of evidence or fact," Kelly said of Kennedy's comments.

A recent comprehensive study showed that over half of people with generalized anxiety disorder taking an SSRI saw their anxiety symptoms reduced by at least 50 percent. Side effects prompted about 1 in 12 to stop taking an SSRI.

"When it's being done right and when you're also using appropriate therapy techniques, SSRIs can be really, really helpful," said Emily Wood, a psychiatrist who practices in Los Angeles.

"It definitely helped me get back to my day-to-day in a way that was productive and not just riddled with my anxieties throughout the day."

SADIA ZAPP
Breast cancer survivor

MAHA blames anxiety on poor diet, lack of exercise

Supporters of MAHA have partly blamed poor dietary choices and the increase of a sedentary lifestyle for the rise of a number of health problems, including anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. As a remedy, they have called for measures such as reducing consumption of ultraprocessed foods, which studies inrecent yearshave connected to depression and anxiety, and cutting back on screen time in favor of exercise.

Psychiatrists often encourage a healthy diet and exercise as an adjunctive therapy for anxiety and depression. Wood said those who can manage anxiety without medication should also consider talk therapy. The proportion of American adults using mental health counseling boomed from 2019 to 2024 as teletherapy grew in popularity, federal data shows. "Anxiety disorders are amongst our psychiatric disorders that really respond well to cognitive behavioral therapy," she said.

But medication can help.

Studies show the risks of taking SSRIs during pregnancy are low for mother and child. By contrast, "depression increases your risk for every complication for a mother and a baby," Wood said, adding that recent statements by government officials about SSRI use during pregnancy are "potentially leading to real harm for these women."

Some people who stop taking antidepressant medication will experience nausea, insomnia, or other symptoms, especially if they quit suddenly. But "the concept of addiction simply does not apply to these chemicals," Kelly said, a statement backed upby studies.

Addiction, though, is a possibility with benzodiazepines such as Xanax that are often a second line of treatment for anxiety. These controlled substances can also increase the risk of opioid overdose in patients taking both types of drugs. During congressional hearings last year, Kennedy also decried benzodiazepine overuse as a problem.

While benzodiazepines are effective for short-term use, they require monitoring and care, Wood said.

"Those are really great meds for acute anxiety and not great as long-term anxiety medications, because they are habit-forming over time," Wood said. "If you're taking them on a daily basis, you'll need more and more to get the same effect, and then you have to come down from them in a tapered way."

And an increasing number of people are also occasionally taking beta-blockers such as propranolol for anxiety. Some people use beta-blockers to prevent a racing heart before a public speech or other big moments, even though they are not FDA-approved for treating anxiety and are prescribed "off-label."

Beta-blockers can cause dizziness and fatigue, but they are "nonaddictive, really helpful for bringing down the autonomic nervous system, going from fight or flight to something more neutral, and really safe," Wood said.

Social shifts drive increased use of anxiety meds

A number of leading theories could explain why so many more people are taking anxiety medication, including increased social media use, more isolation, and heightened economic uncertainty, physicians and researchers say.

Plus, the medicines are relatively easy to get. Many people obtain SSRI and benzodiazepine prescriptions from their primary care physician. Others obtain the medications after a brief teletherapy appointment.

Many social media influencers talk abouttheirmental health struggles, easing some stigma among young people and encouraging them to get help. About a third of teens in a recent study said they get mental health information via social media.

Still, increased access to anxiety medication can be a problem when combined with a trend of self-diagnosis based on social media trends. A Google search for "buy Xanax online" leads to sponsored promises of same-day treatment, though fine-print disclaimers clarify that a prescription is not guaranteed.

"I think increased access is good, but that's not the same thing as, you know, ordering Xanax online," Kelly said.

Young adults are largely driving an increase in anxiety medication use. The proportion of Americans ages 18 to 34 taking anxiety medication rose from 8.8 percent in 2019 – the first year such survey data became available – to 14.6 percent in 2024. By contrast, the rate didn't change much among adults 65 and older, CDC data shows.

The pandemic and covid lockdowns greatly increased stress among many American adults, particularly young adults.

And data shows more women than men take anxiety medication. Jason Schnittker, a department chair and professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, said that's because they're more likely to need them. They are also likelier than men to report when they feel anxious, and doctors are "inclined or see anxiety more readily in their female patients than their male patients," Schnittker added.

Broader trends could also be at work. Schnittker said studies have shown anxiety growing more prevalent among ensuing generations for much of the 20th and 21st centuries. Schnittker, author of Unnerved: Anxiety, Social Change, and the Transformation of Modern Mental Health , said growing income inequality could be partly to blame, with people feeling stress over improving their economic status. Social and religious activities have been replaced by more isolation. And people have become more suspicious of others, creating a sense of unease around strangers.

For Zapp, the cancer survivor, it took a few months on Lexapro before she started seeing clear results. When she did, she said, it felt like her mind was less noisy, making it easier to focus. She also underwent talk therapy, but now her chronic anxiety is stabilized on medication alone.

"It definitely helped me get back to my day-to-day in a way that was productive and not just riddled with my anxieties throughout the day," she said.

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FINANCE

1040
U.S. Individual Income Tax Return
Department of the Treasury—Internal Revenue Service
2025
Payments and Refundable Credits
If you have a qualifying child, you may need to attach Sch. EIC.

1miro / Dreamstime / TNS

The average tax refund amount is up 14 percent from the same time period last year.

Tax refunds are larger this year

Make yours a stepping stone for your future

By TED ROSSMAN
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Tax refunds are the biggest windfall of the year for many American households. And 'tis the season: Through the week ending Feb. 13, nearly 13 million people had received 2025 federal tax refunds averaging $2,476, according to the IRS.

That average refund amount is up 14 percent from the same time period last year, and it's expected to grow in the coming weeks. For example, the IRS wasn't allowed to begin processing refunds involving the Earned Income Tax Credit or the Additional Child Tax Credit until Feb. 15. Various provisions of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) should amplify refunds this year, including an expanded child tax credit, a larger state and local tax deduction and lower taxes on tips and overtime.

Finally, some good news in a sea of affordability concerns. Now the big question: If you're receiving one of these tax refunds, how can you best put the money to work to improve your financial well-being?

Well, to put it bluntly, the best use for your tax refund is investing in your future – whatever that may look like for you.

If you're buried in credit card or other debt, debt payoff is likely the way to go. If you're dreaming of buying a home, socking that money away for your down payment is an appropriate course of action. Lacking an emergency fund? Think about putting your windfall into a rainy day account.

Your individual circumstances can help you choose the right path, but here are some guidelines to help you make the decision.

Tackle your credit card debt

Paying down credit card debt belongs at the top of the list if this is something you're struggling with. The average credit card balance is $6,715, according to TransUnion. If you make minimum payments toward that average balance at the average credit card rate of 19.59 percent, you'll be in debt for 221 months (more than 18 years) and you'll end up paying $9,553 in interest.

This is why credit card debt payoff should be a priority – credit card rates are so much higher than most other forms of consumer debt, such as mortgages, auto loans and student loans.

Let's say you put the average tax refund ($2,476) toward the average credit card balance. That knocks it down by more than a third. If you make minimum payments toward the remaining $4,239 at 19.59 percent, you'll be in debt for 176 months with a total interest expense of $5,512. In other words, that $2,476 payment could save you more than $4,000 in interest charges and trim almost four years off your payback term.

Of course, we'd love to see you pay it off even sooner. Just over half of credit cardholders pay in full in a typical month, according to Bankrate's 2026 Credit Card Debt Report. If you need more time, consider signing up for a card with a generous 0 percent balance transfer promotion. Some of these deals last up to 24 months. If you put the average tax refund toward the average credit card balance and spread the remaining $4,239 over 24 equal interest-free installments, you would only have to pay about $177 per month (not counting the typical transfer fee of 3-5 percent, which would cost you between $130 and $212).

Boost your emergency savings

The number one thing that gets people into credit card debt, according to our 2026 Credit Card Debt Report, is an emergency expense such as a medical bill, car repair or home repair. Credit card debt and emergency savings, therefore, are essentially two sides of the same coin.

Fewer than half of Americans have the liquidity to cover an unexpected $1,000 expense from savings or other readily available funds, Bankrate reports, which causes many to take on credit card debt. And only 46 percent of U.S. adults have at least three months' worth of expenses in the bank.

Putting some or all of your tax refund into savings is a worthy choice that can help you sleep better at night and prevent incurring high-cost debt. While we'd love you to get to a point where you have six months' expenses set aside, when people dip into their emergency savings, the most common amount is between $1,000 and $2,499. Your tax refund could more than cover that.

And remember: It doesn't have to be an either/or decision. You could do both, splitting your refund between credit card debt payoff and emergency savings. In fact, if you have credit card debt and are feeling undersaved, a split decision probably represents the best of both worlds.

Because if you put the entire refund toward your credit card debt, you might not have enough savings for the next inevitable surprise expense, starting the credit card debt cycle all over again. But if you put it all into savings, you could be incurring 20 percent+ interest charges that might otherwise be avoided.

Tackling both priorities simultaneously can make sense, even if it means that you'll take a bit longer to reach your goals. That's okay. Paying down debt and building savings are journeys; it's not just about the destination.

Save for a home purchase

When it comes to future financial success, home ownership remains a considerable wealth-building opportunity despite mortgage rates still well above pandemic-era lows and home prices at record highs. In fact, the speed at which home prices have risen in recent years should emphasize how much wealth you can build through home ownership.

Getting to the point where you can qualify for the best mortgage rates or best afford the home you want means getting your financial house in order first. That's where your tax refund comes in. Assuming you've already paid off expensive debt and feel good about your emergency savings, your tax refund can go into your down payment fund.

No, you don't need 20 percent down anymore to get into a home, but the more you can put down, the less you have to borrow. Borrowing less means lower monthly payments as well as lower interest paid out overall.

Put your money to work

If you have a bit more wiggle room in your budget, investing your tax refund can be an excellent choice. This option is especially attractive if you have a solid emergency savings cushion and are free from credit card debt.

Stocks have historically returned an average of about 10 percent per year, so a $2,476 tax refund invested today could grow to about $6,422 in 10 years, $16,657 in 20 years and $43,205 in 30 years. Whether you end up putting that money toward retirement costs, your kid's college expenses, the down payment on a home or something else, it's a nice chunk of change resulting from a single windfall.

I love these illustrations of how much your investments can grow over time, particularly if you set it and forget it. That is, pick a simple, low-cost index fund and match average market returns over the years. Your investing strategy doesn't need to be complicated to be effective.

Have a little fun along the way

While adulting priorities are such that you should do something practical with your tax refund, you can still carve out some fun money while you're at it. Like a diet or exercise regimen, if you go too hard, your efforts will probably fizzle.

Do something responsible with most of your tax refund – such as paying down debt, boosting your savings and/or investing for your future – while setting aside at least a couple hundred dollars for things you'll enjoy. A nice dinner out, a new pair of shoes, a new video game system… you get the idea. Indulging in the occasional reward can actually encourage you to stick with your long-term quest for financial responsibility.

Tax refund season is a great time to make progress toward your financial goals. Think of how good it will feel to see a substantially lower credit card balance, more money in the bank toward a home purchases or emergency fund, or a larger investment portfolio. This is found money of the highest order (a lot more than the $20 you left in your coat pocket last winter), and putting it to good use can set you up for financial success throughout the remainder of 2026 and beyond.

Visit Bankrate online at bankrate.com.

FOOD

Dumpling lasagna is made with wonton wrappers and seasoned pork instead of pasta, cheese and red sauce. Gretchen McKay / Post-Gazette / TNS

GRETCHEN'S TABLE

This low-fuss dumpling lasagna gets steamed on the stovetop

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Lasagna never fails to please, but its preparation – and storage of leftovers – can be a hassle.

But portioning the layered dish into individual servings before cooking and steaming it on the stovetop? Now you're talking. Suddenly lasagna is both quick and easy.

This craveable recipe, a variation on what's been making the rounds on social media over the past few months, features all the great flavors you find in an Asian-style soup dumpling: juicy pork seasoned with garlic, green onion and chopped cabbage, a savory mix of soy and oyster sauces, Shaoxing wine and toasted sesame oil.

But you can skip the tedious work of wrapping wonton after wonton around scoops of filling to make 20 or 30 small packages you can fry or boil. For this dish, you layer the meat and wrappers like a parfait or seven-layer dip in ramekins (or small soup cups or bowls).

After topping off the mini-lasagnas with a little water or broth, the ramekins are steamed on the stove top until the wonton wrappers are soft and wonderfully tender and the pork is fragrant and cooked through.

There is a catch: You have to have a large and wide enough soup pot to comfortably fit four ramekins, and it has to have a lid. Otherwise, you'll need to do the cooking in batches.

I used ground pork (because its fat makes it juicy) and chopped green cabbage in the filling, but you also could use ground chicken or shrimp – or make it completely vegetarian with tofu. Or, punch up the flavor with the addition of mushrooms or carrots.

Definitely don't forget a generous spoonful of chili crisp or swirl of spicy chili oil before taking that first awesome bite. The deep umami flavor of the condiments will add a rich, textural finish that makes the dish irresistible.

Wonton wrappers are usually tucked among the vegetables in your grocery's refrigerated produce aisle.

Shaoxing wine is a nutty amber-colored cooking wine that adds complexity and depth of flavor to many Chinese dishes (it's a staple in Chinese cooking). If you can't find it, substitute dry cooking sherry or a dash of mirin, a Japanese sweet rice wine.

The lasagnas reheat well the next day in the microwave.

Dumpling Lasagna
Serves 4

FOR GROUND PORK MIXTURE:
3/4 pound ground pork
1/2 cup chopped or finely shredded napa or green cabbage
2 thinly sliced green onions, plus more for garnish
1 tablespoon Shaoxing wine or mirin
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 tablespoon sesame oil
1 tablespoon oyster sauce
2 garlic cloves, finely minced
1-inch knob fresh ginger, grated or minced
FOR SOUP:
1 package wonton wrappers
Water or broth, for filling ramekins
Chili oil or chili crisp, for garnish

Prepare the dumpling filling. In a large bowl, combine ground pork, chopped cabbage, green onions, Shaoxing wine or mirin, soy sauce, sesame oil, oyster sauce, minced garlic and ginger. Use your hands or a fork to mix everything together until well combined.

In small soup bowl or 6-ounce ramekin, add a layer of ground pork mixture, then a dumpling wrapper, pressing down gently with your fingers.

Continue with another layer of filling and then a wonton wrapper, pressing gently as you go. Add 1 more layer of pork filling, until the ramekin is nearly full. (There should be three layers of pork.)

Add 1/3 cup of water or vegetable/chicken stock, then top off with another layer of wonton wrap. Press the dumpling wrapper down gently with fingers so it is submerged in the liquid.

Repeat with 3 more ramekins/soup bowls.

Place ramekins in a large pot and add water halfway up the sides. Cover with a lid and boil and steam for 20 minutes, or until the pork is fully cooked and the wonton wrappers are soft and tender when pierced with the tip of a knife or pressed with your finger. Note: If all the ramekins don't fit in the pot at the same time, you will have to cook the lasagnas in batches.

Carefully remove ramekins/bowls from the steamer using tongs, place on a plate and finish with a drizzle of chili oil or generous spoonful of chili crisp. Top with sliced green onions, and serve warm straight from the ramekin.

Warm up your weekends with these winter brunch recipes

By MEREDITH DEEDS and CONNOR DEEDS
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

By the time winter reaches its midpoint, it is easy to feel like the only sensible plan is to hunker down and wait for brighter days. Hosting a winter brunch, though – something colorful, comforting and celebratory – can be the perfect way to bring a little sunshine to a cold, gray season.

A fennel salad makes a bright, refreshing start, especially as winter citrus hits its peak. Thinly sliced fennel provides the crisp backbone, its mild sweetness pairing beautifully with apples, pomegranate seeds and juicy orange slices. A miso-apple cider vinaigrette keeps the dish from leaning too sweet. The miso brings an umami punch that balances the fennel and is the perfect foil to the fruit, giving the salad a savory depth that wakes the palate and sets a lively tone for the rest of the meal.

Crepes always feel like a party, and part of their charm is how easy they are to prepare. They can be made the day before, stacked between parchment sheets, covered and tucked into the refrigerator until needed. That alone makes them a gift to any host. But when you top them with a cream made from mascarpone – cream cheese's richer, sexier Italian cousin – and warm brandied pears swimming in a caramel sauce, they become something truly special.

Of course, every brunch needs a showstopper, and ours comes straight from the viral Dubai chocolate trend. Instead of serving it in its usual chocolate bar form, we fold those flavors into a flaky tart with a pistachio frangipane and a crispy mix of kataifi and pistachio cream, which is now widely available at most grocery stores. (Kataifi, those fine, shredded pastry threads, can be ordered online or picked up at a Middle Eastern market.) Together, they create a dessert that is dramatic without being fussy, offering a mix of silky, crunchy and gooey textures with just the right hit of saltiness to make guests lean in for seconds.

If you feel like your brunch table needs protein to be complete, just add your favorite egg dish or a platter of crispy bacon or sliced baked ham. If you're going the ham route, make sure it's not coated in a sweet glaze. Between the crepes and the tart, you've got everyone's sweet tooth covered.

A winter brunch doesn't need to be elaborate to feel restorative. A few thoughtful dishes, a chilled bottle of bubbly or a pot of good coffee and the simple pleasure of gathering around a table can shift the whole mood of the season and create a moment of brightness. And that's its own kind of comfort.

Fennel Salad with Winter Fruits and Miso Vinaigrette
Serves 8

Fresh, crisp and brightly flavored, this salad is lovely for a brunch but works just as well at dinner too. A mandoline helps get consistently thin slices of the fennel, shallot and apple, but a sharp knife works well, too.

FOR THE SALAD:
2 medium fennel bulbs
1 Honeycrisp apple
1 small shallot, peeled
2 oranges, peeled and segmented
1/4 c. pomegranate seeds
FOR THE DRESSING:
2 tbsp. white miso
3 tbsp. apple cider vinegar
2 tsp. Dijon mustard
1 1/2 tsp. honey
5 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
Pinch of salt and freshly ground black pepper

Trim the fennel, reserving a few of the fronds for garnish, and slice the bulbs as thinly as possible. Transfer the fennel to a large bowl. Thinly slice the apple and shallot and add them to the bowl with the fennel.

In a separate bowl, mix together the white miso, apple cider vinegar, Dijon mustard and honey. Whisk and then drizzle in the olive oil and season with salt and pepper to taste.

Add the orange segments and pomegranate seeds to the bowl with the fennel. Pour the vinaigrette over the top and toss gently to coat everything.

Transfer the salad to a serving platter and top with reserved fennel fronds.

Crepes with Mascarpone Cream and Caramelized Brandied Pears
Serves 8

Crepes always make a meal feel special, but when they're topped with a luscious, creamy filling and saucy, caramelized pears, it's even more true. From Meredith Deeds.

FOR THE MASCARPONE CREAM:
1 c. (8 oz.) mascarpone cheese
1/2 c. heavy cream
3 tbsp. powdered sugar
1 tsp. lemon juice
For the crepes:
3 tbsp. melted butter, plus more for cooking
1 1/2 c. all-purpose flour
1 1/2 tbsp. granulated sugar
3/4 tsp. salt
1 3/4 c. whole milk
3 large eggs
2 tsp. pure vanilla extract
FOR THE TOPPING:
3 large firm Bartlett pears
1/2 cup sugar
3 tbsp. unsalted butter
3 tbsp. brandy

For the mascarpone cream: In a medium bowl, whisk together the mascarpone, cream, powdered sugar and lemon juice until smooth. Keep covered and chilled until ready to use.

For the crepes: Combine the 3 tablespoons melted butter, flour, granulated sugar, salt, milk, eggs and vanilla in a blender. Blend on medium-high speed for 20 to 30 seconds until combined. The mixture should be smooth and the consistency of heavy cream. Add another tablespoon or two of milk if the batter is too thick. Chill, covered, in the refrigerator for 30 to 60 minutes.

Heat a 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. Lightly grease the skillet with butter, using a paper towel to wipe out the excess. Hold the handle of the pan in one hand and pour in 3 to 4 tablespoons of batter, swirling and tilting pan immediately to spread batter in a thin, even layer over bottom of pan. Cook for 1 to 2 minutes, then flip as soon as the bottom is set and golden brown. Cook the other side for 30 seconds until set. Transfer the cooked crepe to a large plate and repeat with the remaining batter, making sure to butter the pan between each crepe. You should have 16 crepes.

For the pears: Peel, core and slice the pears into ½-inch wedges, then cut each wedge in half crosswise. Warm a large heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat. Once hot, sprinkle the sugar evenly across the pan so it caramelizes uniformly. As soon as the sugar begins to melt, gently move and tilt the pan to keep it from burning and to help the melted sugar flow over the unmelted sugar. Do not stir, just swirl the pan. (Stirring can cause the sugar to crystalize.) Cook until the sugar turns a light golden brown.

Add the butter and stir until fully melted. Add the pears and stir to coat with the sauce. Pour in the brandy and let the mixture cook over medium heat until the pears are just tender but still hold their shape – the tip of a paring knife should slide in easily. If the pears are still firm once the liquid has reduced, add a few tablespoons of water and continue cooking until they reach the desired texture.

To assemble, place the crepes onto serving plates. Top with pears and a dollop of mascarpone cream.

Dubai Chocolate Pistachio Tart
Serves 6 to 8

Note: You'll need a couple of special ingredients for this showstopping tart inspired by the viral trend, but they aren't hard to find. Kataifi, which is dried shredded phyllo dough, can be ordered online or found at a Middle Eastern market, and the sweet pistachio cream can be found in most grocery stores or ordered online.

10 tbsp. unsalted butter, room temperature, divided
2 c. dry kataifi (see Note)
3/4 c. roasted, unsalted pistachios
1/2 c. granulated sugar
1/2 tsp. salt, divided
3 tbsp. all-purpose flour
1 large egg
1/2 pkg. puff pastry, thawed according to package directions
7 to 8 oz. pistachio cream (see Note)
1 tbsp. tahini
1/2 c. chopped milk chocolate

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line a large, rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a saucepan, melt 4 tablespoons of butter on medium heat. Add the kataifi and cook, stirring, until the kataifi is golden brown and toasted, about 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer to a bowl to cool, stirring once or twice, and set aside.

For the frangipane: In the bowl of a food processor, combine the pistachios, sugar, ¼ teaspoon salt and flour. Pulse 8 to 10 times, or until it forms a fine powder. Add remaining 6 tablespoons butter and pulse until smooth. Add egg and pulse until just combined. Set aside.

On a lightly floured work surface, roll out the sheet of puff pastry into a 12- by 9-inch rectangle. Spoon the pistachio frangipane on top of the pastry. Using an offset spatula, spread out the frangipane in an even layer, leaving a ½ inch border around the edges. Transfer to the prepared baking sheet and bake until the puff pastry is puffed up around the edge and golden brown, about 16 to 18 minutes. Remove from the oven, transfer to a rack and let it cool completely.

In a medium bowl combine the pistachio cream, tahini and remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt. Stir until combined. Add the toasted kataifi and stir until combined.

Spread the pistachio-kataifi mixture on top of the cooled tart, leaving the borders uncovered. In a small microwavable bowl, microwave milk chocolate for 45 to 60 seconds, stirring every 15 seconds, until melted and smooth. Transfer to small, resealable food-storage plastic bag; cut off a small corner of the bag. Drizzle chocolate lightly on top of the tart. Cut the tart into 8 pieces and serve.

Meredith Deeds is a cookbook author and food writer from Edina. Reach her at meredithdeeds@gmail.com. Follow her on Instagram at @meredithdeeds.

Shakira performs during the Global Citizen Festival in New York on Sept. 27, 2025.
Charles Sykes / Invision

Shakira says she feels like she's just getting started

A Rock Hall nomination begs to differ

By MARIA SHERMAN
AP Music Writer

Marco Ugarte / AP file photo

Colombian pop star Shakira performs at the Zocalo in Mexico City on March 1, 2026.

NEW YORK — Shakira is on her way to drop her son off at flag football practice. It's an ordinary experience for a mother who, in the not-so-recent past, has been at the center of some pretty extraordinary circumstances.

The boundary-breaking Colombian performer has spent the last year on her first global tour since 2018, where she has made history: Nearly 20 years after her first concert in Mexico City 's Zócalo, the capital's main square, Shakira returned earlier this month to break the plaza's attendance record with about 400,000 fans showing up to see her.

It's impressive for any artist and one that certainly backs up her reputation as the Queen of Latin Music. Across her three-decade-plus career, Shakira has set records and challenged genre lines: from 1991, when she signed a deal with Sony Music Colombia at just 13 years old and released her debut album "Magia" – to breakthrough albums like 1998's "Dónde Están los Ladrones?" and 2001's "Laundry Service" – all the way to her most recent, 2024's "Las Mujeres Ya No Lloran."

But this year is different.

"I'm being able to make so many of my dreams, as an artist, come true on this tour," she told The Associated Press over the phone on Tuesday. "It's everything I ever dreamt about."

That's not all: In February, it was announced that she is a 2026 nominee for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame – a logical selection for an artist lauded for her ability to bridge Latin music with rock and pop.

If she were to be inducted, she would join a small class of Latinos who have done so. She would become the first artist from Colombia, as well as the first Latina born and raised in Latin America, to enter the Rock Hall.

In an interview with the AP, Shakira discusses her history-making Mexico City show, her Rock & Roll Hall of Fame nomination, her next big goal and more.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

AP: Your Zócalo concert was massive. What was going through your mind?

SHAKIRA: That's such a unique moment in time. After playing 13 stadium concerts in Mexico City, I never thought I was gonna have so many people gathering at Zócalo to watch my show one more time. It was just absolutely incredible. And one of those experiences that are unforgettable and that I wish my parents could have seen. That was just really, really, truly magical.

The love and friendship story that I have with Mexico is just uncanny, you know? Nothing compares to it, and it's given me so much. My Mexican fans have given me so much of love and support since the beginning of my career. It was quite incredible also to be able to perform "Dónde Estás Corazón," which was (my) first song that ever played on Mexican radio, like outside my country, you know? And so that was like a full circle moment.

AP: You're also headed to the Pyramids of Giza for the first time in nearly 20 years.

SHAKIRA: It was just one of the most unforgettable performances of my life, and I just wanted it to happen again with this show, with this tour, which to me is the tour of my life. … I actually feel like I'm just starting my career. It's a weird feeling because it's been 30 years, but I feel at the threshold of a new beginning and that is all because my audience has been so emotive and so loyal as well. I've had a blast really performing in every country, every city where we've been. And the next thing is going to be Copacabana (Beach in Rio de Janeiro) as well.

We're gonna have probably two million people on the beach, so that's gonna be pretty crazy, I'm sure.

AP: When I think of the beginning of your career, I think of your rock records. And this year, it was announced that you're a nominee for Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction.

SHAKIRA: I feel really humbled and excited at the same time. It's incredible to be nominated for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and a little bit surreal as well. You know, I've experimented with different genres in my career, but I started out as a rock artist and continued to make rock. My last album, "Las Mujeres Ya No Lloran," there are rock tunes like "Tiempo Sin Verte" or "Cómo Dónde y Cuándo" and every album there are rock tunes because that's an intricate part of my artistic persona. And everything that I listen to is rock music. So, to be nominated, for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, knowing that there are so many incredible icons of rock music that I adore, that inspired me, like The Rolling Stones (are in there) … to me, it is just a privilege and really an amazing moment in my career.

I don't know what's going on. But this year, like, all my wishes are coming true and I think this nomination is one of those things that you probably fantasize about sometime in your career but try not to get too fixated on it. Being nominated is a huge deal for me and my fans who followed my rock career.

AP: What does it mean for your community – for Latinos, for Colombians?

SHAKIRA: I feel very proud as a Latina. I feel like, "Oh damn, I don't know how many Latinos are there, or Latinas, or at least Colombians." I think it might be the first time for a Latino woman, someone born and raised in Latin America, you now, but who is loved and has been devoted to rock 'n' roll since I was, I don't know, 15. Yeah.

I've been listening to rock music and that's how I started my career as well. So yeah, it's just pretty surreal, I gotta say. But I'm very happy for my community as well. I'm happy to feel that I'm representing a part of my community there.

AP: You've said your dreams have come true this year. What's left on the list?

SHAKIRA: I don't know what's going on! But this year, all of those dreams I had way, way back, now they're coming true. So, I'm going to just ask for more. I've always thought it would be pretty crazy to sing at the Eiffel Tower or the Champs-Élysées in Paris. That would be like the ultimate concert as well. But you know, I can't complain. Being in Copacabana this year and the (Giza) Pyramids in Egypt and in Zócalo, that fills my heart. I feel so accomplished as an artist this year, but I'm also so pumped. I really am in love with making music and performing that music, and it's brought so much joy to my life again, after the difficulties that I've been through and bitter moments that I had to endure – like every human being who goes through hardship.

MOVIE REVIEW

Decadent and disorderly, *'The Bride!'* is a spectacular beast rampaging out of control

By AMY NICHOLSON
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Warner Bros. Pictures / TNS

Jessie Buckley in the movie "The Bride!"

"The Bride!" is a maniacal assemblage of '30s musicals, '40s noirs, 19th century literature and 21st century ideology. Every wacky second, you're well aware how perilously close it is to falling apart at the seams. This spiritual sequel to "Frankenstein" is a romantic tale of obsession, possession and fantasy – adjectives that also apply to its filmmaker, Maggie Gyllenhaal, who expends massive quantities of energy jolting it to life. She succeeds by the skin of her teeth.

The monster's missus comes with as much narrative anticipation as Godot. Mary Shelley's 1818 novel has Dr. Frankenstein bicker with his creature about her potential existence before deciding against it in fear that "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate." Over a hundred years later, the debate continued, raging through nearly all of 1935's "Bride of Frankenstein" which finally introduces Elsa Lanchester and her sky-high bouffant five minutes before the end credits, just enough time for her to make an iconic impression before her arranged husband blows them both to smithereens. Boris Karloff laments, "She hate me." Lanchester's Bride never speaks and quite possibly never knows what is happening to her at all.

Gyllenhaal's empowerment story, meanwhile, feels like an unhinged scream. Jessie Buckley (who starred in Gyllenhaal's debut, "The Lost Daughter") tackles the dual roles of the Bride and Shelley, a hat tip to Lanchester, who did the same thing. The action starts in Shelley's grave where she's spent centuries seething about the sequel she never dared to write, then cuts to an American nightclub, where her spirit suddenly possesses a drunken strumpet named Ida (Buckley) – not smoothly but herky-jerky, with the angry author causing this gangster's moll to go on the fritz. Her accent alternates mid-sentence from city gal to snidely British, Ida loudly accusing a mob boss of murdering women. She's right and she's next.

Our setting is 1936 Chicago, but this is an exaggerated, fictional world, not ours or even Karloff's. Elsewhere in town, the original creature, played by Christian Bale, has lurched here from Austria still on his lonely quest for companionship. (For simplicity's sake, he goes by Frank.) He begs the ethically gray Dr. Euphronius (Annette Bening) to help him finally experience what he chivalrously calls, "a garden of pleasure." The blunter and crasser Euphronius asks if Frank has a specific shape of mammaries in mind. (Her maid, played by Jeannie Berlin, is a riot.)

This Bride comes alive roughly and rudely not having given her consent either. Regardless, now that she's here, she still has to figure out her next move, with or without Frank, and often without key pieces of information. Frank has convinced her she's an amnesiac. Also, somehow, she doesn't even know that she's dead.

The theme is, of course, a woman's right to choose. But what's interesting about Gyllenhaal's approach is that she expands Ida's options beyond an enthusiastic yes and a priggish no into a dim sum menu that includes a dubious yes, an asterisked yes and a no that rejects even having to answer the question. She also overuses Bartleby the Scrivener's line, "I would prefer not to." I would prefer not to hear that quote a dozen times in two hours, but neither I nor the Bride get exactly what we want.

A perversity in the script is that Frank is a manipulator and a gaslighter but overall a pretty good dude. Their bond is messy and thrilling, with one of the most delightful romantic montages in ages. There's a great scene where Frank exposes his unbeating heart to her and gets rejected, yet he laughs with delight because the Bride's stubborn spirit is exactly what he likes about her.

The Bride also looks dynamite in her bias-cut coral dress and peekaboo black lace bra. Her zapping turns her entire head of hair – not just a streak – shocking white à la Jean Harlow, and leaves an oddly-appealing black blotch on her cheek. It's a fabulous look, at once sexy and frightful, with an element of cartoonishness as the movie sends her speeding around the country pursued by gangsters and the police, changing stolen cars but never her clothes.

The movie makes no secret of its phony mechanics. In one scene, the Bride is the most famous outlaw in America; in the next, a cop doesn't recognize her at all. There are several moments that force you to accept that the characters can become psychic at will, including one where Frank somehow mind-controls a party to dance the jitterbug – heck, we almost believe that he invented it – and the smart move is just to give in and enjoy the number.

Whatever Gyllenhaal wants to do, she does, which becomes its own act of captivation and reckless empowerment. It helps that Buckley and Bale are terrific, as is the ensemble at large. The full force of

'Film Title'

MPA rating: R (for strong/bloody violent content, sexual content/nudity and language)

Running time: 2:06

How to watch: In theaters

Lawrence Sher's cinematography, Karen Murphy's production design and Hildur Gunadóttir's orchestral score is fabulous, combining to make something seedy, moody and extravagant.

Gyllenhaal's love for other variations of this story is right up there onscreen with brash callbacks to Mel Brooks' 1974 "Young Frankenstein" and the underrated "Frankenhooker." Yet "The Bride!" isn't just assembled from her passion for those movies. It seems to be made of every movie: a wild and playful and overbearing ambulation of references.

Almost every role is a Franken-character of the director's cinematic obsessions, like Penélope Cruz's lady detective who is named for "The Thin Man's" Myrna Loy, acts like "His Girl Friday's" Rosalind Russell, and dresses like Barbara Stanwyck in "Double Indemnity." I suspect that Gyllenhaal's favorite movie might be the same as my own, the bitterly nostalgic '80s-does-'30s Steve Martin musical "Pennies from Heaven." Watch it and tell me if you agree and even if you don't, at least you'll have seen one of the greatest films of all time.

There's a scene in which Frank meets his own idol, an alt-world version of Fred Astaire (played by Gyllenhaal's brother Jake, who is good at mugging and singing), and vomits his fandom at him until the actor recoils. The intensity of devotion can feel a bit like that. It also exposes that our culture is ready for its own shock of invention. Shelley spawned the entire genre of modern science fiction; today's talents often feel like remix artists.

Like the mad scientists she's sending up, Gyllenhaal goes too far. She triply underlines her feminist themes and nearly sabotages her own clever creation. Ironically, she doesn't trust the audience to think for itself either. The overkill hits its nadir when the Bride repeatedly wails the survivors' hashtag, "Me too!" But grab a scalpel and cut 10 minutes out of it and "The Bride!" would be a rip-roaring dazzler. This monster is more than alive, it's allliiiiiive.

SERIES REVIEW

In *'Rooster,'* Steve Carell leads a comedy about a father-daughter relationship

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Katrina Marcinowski / HBO / TNS

From left to right: Steve Carell and Charly Clive in "Rooster."

In "Rooster," a genial comedy now on HBO, Steve Carell, comfortable as an uncomfortable person, plays Greg Russo, the author of a best-selling series of books whose hero is named Rooster. He has come to leafy, fictional Ludlow College to give a reading, but also because it's where his daughter, Katie (Charly Clive) teaches art history, and because it's all over school that her husband, Archie (Phil Dunster), a history professor, has left her for Sunny (Lauren Tsai), a graduate student in neuroscience. He's a concerned father.

"They are light; they are fun. The characters that you like have sex, the ones you don't get shot in the face," Greg tells poetry professor Dylan (Danielle Deadwyler) of the "beach read" books he writes, as she ushers him to an auditorium. Unlike his fictional alter ego, Greg is by his own account a self-conscious introvert, heightened by the fact that his ex-wife, Elizabeth (Connie Britton) – "a philanthropist, a pioneer in corporate gender equality and an accomplished CEO" whose name adorns the school's new student center – left him five years earlier and he never moved on. Additionally, Greg likes nuts and cocoa, can toss a penny into a jar from across a room, and played minor league hockey, which will put him back on skates here.

College president Walter Mann (John C. McGinley) decides it would be "a feather in his cap" to hire a reluctant Greg, "a best-selling author that the parents have actually heard of," as an artist-in-residence – a deal he makes impossible to refuse by agreeing to keep Katie on staff after she accidentally burns down Archie's house. (She was only trying to burn his first edition of "War & Peace.") It's a role quite like the one McGinley played/plays on "Scrubs," but more politic and better dressed, when dressed – he takes meetings in his backyard sauna.

And they're off.

The series was created by Bill Lawrence ("Ted Lasso,""Shrinking,""Scrubs,""Bad Monkey") and frequent collaborator Matt Tarses, and as men of at least a certain age, the view is slanted from experience back toward innocence; students play a secondary, though not insignificant role in the story. There are some pro forma jokes about the sensitivities of the young, with Greg getting into not-very-hot water over misunderstood references to "white whale" and the Bangles' "Walk Like an Egyptian." ("Liberal arts college used to be havens for free thought, Greg," says Walt. "When did you and I become the bad guys?") Not that the olds are reliably smart about life – the ways in which they're not power the series – but they have a better notion of where they're stupid.

"No one must be humiliated," Greg says to Archie, quoting Chekhov, as Archie goes off to talk to Katie. (The quote is in the animated opening titles as well, so you can take it as important.) But no one here is out to humiliate anyone, which is nasty and unkind and not at all the sort of humor Lawrence trades in. Of course, characters will be put into embarrassing positions, or embarrass themselves, embarrassment being the root of all comedy, or near enough. (There's a good bit of slapstick knitted in.) And though we're told that "there are real villains lurking around this place," niceness reigns – at least through the six episodes, of 10, available to review – with the possible exception of Alan Ruck as the dean of English. ("There's no way she wrote all these poems," he says of Emily Dickinson.)

Though there are couples, and ex-couples and new couples, one doesn't necessarily feel invested in their getting together, or staying together, or getting back together. Indeed, as in other Lawrence projects – which typically feature divorced or separated characters – romance is a sort of side dish, less the issue than whether people are managing to treat one another well. We knew Ted Lasso wasn't going to get his wife back, but it wasn't the point (nor was winning games, really); kindness was what mattered. Greg's possibly pre-romantic friendship with Dylan is no more significant than his cross-generational friendship with a group of goofball students (led by Maximo Solas as Tommy); they treat each other as peers, while knowing they aren't. He teaches them that peanut butter can make celery better, and they teach him that he's cooler than he thinks.

Katie, who says she still loves Archie – who says he still loves her – will also call him "a run-of-the-mill narcissistic a— who sometimes smells like wildflowers." (As for Sunny, practical and deadpan – that no one gets her jokes is a running joke – not even Archie can see what she sees in him, a problem you might have as well, but, as is true of most everyone here, we're not meant to merely write him off. Funny secondary characters, who get some of the best business, notably include Rory Scovel as a cop who can't keep track of his gun, Robby Hoffman as Sunny's intense, anti-Archie roommate and Annie Mumolo (co-writer of "Bridesmaids") as Walt's arch assistant.

Old-but-not-that-old-fashioned, "Rooster" has a tinge of Gen X nostalgia, underscored by the '80s college radio classics that line the soundtrack. (R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe co-wrote and sings the series' theme, and Greg, drunk and in a mood, will kill a party getting the DJ to play "Everybody Hurts." Directed by Jonathan Krisel ("Portlandia," "Baskets"), it's low stakes, soft-edged, humane, basically gentle, a little fantastic, a little farcical, well cast and well played in every instance – qualities I happen to like, and maybe you do, too.

Michael Tran / AFP via Getty Images / TNS

Jo Koy, right, and Gabriel "Fluffy" Iglesias pose after Koy's Hand and Footprint Ceremony at TCL Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles on Feb. 11.

Jo Koy and Fluffy's sold-out SoFi show marks a turning point for stand-up comedy

By NATE JACKSON
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Running free during a game of catch on the empty field at SoFi Stadium is a fantasy most Angelenos will never experience. For comedians Jo Koy and Gabriel Iglesias, it's just a warmup to a dream that's been a lifetime in the making.

Gripping the football with fingers covered in Filipino tribal tattoos extending in a sleeve up his arm, Koy looks across the expanse of emerald green turf at his son jogging toward the south end zone of the Inglewood stadium on a recent afternoon. "To be able to throw at SoFi is crazy," Koy said with a sparkling grin of bright white veneers.

The 54-year-old comedian with a beard full of gray stubble drops back to pass, launching a tight spiral underneath SoFi's massive technicolor halo scoreboard hovering above a sea of empty stands. Joseph Jr. – a wiry 22-year-old with a head full of curly dark brown hair – runs briskly toward the goal line with a black cast on his left arm. He raises his right arm just in time to scoop it into his chest for a touchdown. The imaginary crowd goes wild.

"Yes!!!" Koy shouts, his excitement echoing in the stadium. He jogs over to Joseph in his navy blue coverall jumpsuit and L.A. Dodgers cap to deliver a satisfying father-son chest bump.

A few yards away, Iglesias is watching Roka, his tiny black chihuahua, dart around the field like four pounds of rambunctious entitlement. The plus-sized comedian – better known as "Fluffy" – is sporting his typical loose-fitting vintage Hawaiian shirt, denim shorts and black flat cap. Whenever they stand together, the duo's dynamic is like a modern-day Laurel and Hardy.

"The fact that we've known each other as long as we have is wild ... we've known each other since we both had hair," Iglesias, 49, says as they both lift up their caps in unison, laughing and exposing their shiny bald heads.

On March 21, this stadium will be filled with more than 70,000 guests as the pair takes center stage at the Super Bowl of comedy – the largest stadium stand-up show to date. Koy and Iglesias are now part of a small fraternity of comics, including Kevin Hart, Dane Cook, Bill Burr and Larry the Cable Guy, who've sold out stadiums across the country.

The one-night-only show, which won't be televised or recorded as a special, is meant to be one giant party for comedy fans who've supported Koy and Iglesias since their early days. The comics will be passing the mic back and forth throughout the night, which will feature special guests, surprise moments and plenty of other unplanned interruptions that will make for a roughly four-hour show. Though the L.A. comedy scene tends to exist in the shadow of Hollywood, this feat managed by two of its biggest names puts a historic spotlight on stand-up.

"It's more sweet because it's taken so long," Iglesias said. "This wasn't an overnight thing. Nowadays, everybody wants everything so fast. Between the two of us, we've got about 60 years of comedy experience."

"It's insane. I can't explain it," Koy adds, staring up at the stadium's glass roof, preparing to crack it with decibels of laughter. "Every time we come in here and look up, I'm like, 'There's going to be a stage here the size of the end zone.' We took the stage from the arenas that we normally play and injected steroids into it."

For comedians who've witnessed their ascent, which now literally includes hands and feet cemented in front of TCL Chinese Theatre and a star for Fluffy on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the journey has been incredible to watch.

"It's huge for stand-up, it used to be just in dingy clubs and bars and always something small and intimate and kinda like an afterthought," said fellow comedy star Tiffany Haddish, a longtime friend to both Koy and Iglesias. "To be honest I never thought comedy would be this big."

Jay Leno, a confidant to Iglesias and the man who inspired him to start his own insane car collection and offered Koy his first late-night appearance on "The Tonight Show," agrees that a show like this is a huge step for comedy.

"My attitude when I came to this town was if you can't get in through the front door, go in the back door," Leno said. "And they didn't do it the traditional way, they got to where they are as comedians, one audience member at a time."

When the pair of arena-selling comics announced last year they'd be joining forces to perform at SoFi, the task of filling the massive concert venue and football stadium seemed laughable. But within a week, it clearly wasn't a joke. Nearly 70 percent of the tickets were sold just days after going on sale. Now, weeks before the gig, the show is completely sold out with more seats being added. If there's one person who is not necessarily surprised, it's Iglesias. By his calculations – including his ability to sell out Dodger Stadium twice for the filming of his 2022 Netflix special, "Stadium Fluffy," and Koy's ability to sell out the Forum a record-setting six consecutive times (more than any other comedian) – the math checked out.

"At a certain point it's like we've been doing [huge stand-up shows] for so many years, it becomes normal," Iglesias said. "What do you do to change things? What do you do to grow? The worst thing that happens is it fails. But at least we know we tried it. Then we know what our ceiling is. But as of now, this isn't the ceiling."

Despite the logic, looking at the stadium's massive seating chart during an initial meeting with the venue made the task feel akin to climbing Mt. Everest.

"SoFi is the size of like five Forums. That seating chart on a wall was the most discouraging thing I could possibly look at," Koy said. "And then looking at the amount of money it was gonna cost us even before we sell one ticket. Me and Gabe should've been looking at that and been like, 'What ... are we thinking? Hell nah we ain't doing this ... !'"

It took more than a little convincing from Iglesias to get Koy on board. "[Jo] does not like change. I had to break down the math for him and I pushed it a lot," Iglesias said. "And I'm glad we did because now that it's sold out, the hard part is over. We just have to show up and deliver a kick-ass show. And then we can both celebrate after, crack a couple bottles and I know I'm taking a week off after that."

Unlike a typical arena show, which takes several months to coordinate, their big night at SoFi required a full year of planning. The production and stage will be three times the size of the comedians' normal stages and will be managed by the same team that produces stadium shows for acts like Los Bukis and Bad Bunny.

"It's almost like a chessboard," Iglesias said. "You got to do a bunch of moves in order to pull something like this off, it's not just we're gonna do it. This took a lot of planning, a lot of coordinating."

When asked how the tickets could've possibly moved so fast, outside of typical avenues of good marketing and promotion, Koy says it was really comedy fans making a statement of support for them and for stand-up.

"There's no such thing as marketing on this one, to me it's a phenom," he said, noting the pride both he and Iglesias have to see the excitement and support from local fans, especially Filipino and Latin communities across L.A. that have been a major part of their respective fan bases. "That type of reaction and that response to us saying we're gonna be at SoFi is almost like a bragging right and it's 'our night, we're gonna be there, I don't care where we're sitting.'"

The SoFi gig was conceived in February of 2024 during Koy's sixth sold-out show at Kia Forum. In the hoopla of Koy breaking his own audience record at the venue, Iglesias crashed the show, presented his friend with a plaque and laid down the gauntlet in front of 17,500 fans. When Iglesias asked Koy if they should contemplate performing "across the street" together, the crowd erupted with excitement.

"Our agents and managers were like, 'Are you sure you wanna do that?'" Iglesias said. "I think they missed a couple bonuses. But at the end of the day, it's part of history."

"That's what's beautiful about Gabe, he's not scared to take on those big risks," Koy said. "But the whole thing was a risk. We gotta alter our tour dates and sacrifice other opportunities to make this happen."

For Koy, a life of comedy was a risk inspired by his heroes while growing up in Tacoma, Washington. He traces it back to being 15 and seeing Eddie Murphy perform at Climate Pledge Arena during his "Raw" tour in Seattle. He remembers taking a panoramic look at the sold-out crowd roaring in the darkness before the leather-suited legend even took the stage. "I'm like, 'Wait a minute, this guy got this many people in here?' I just thought that was the most impossible thing," Koy remembers. "And now I get to share this moment with my son and let him walk with me and let him see that this is possible."

When Koy was moving up the comedy ranks under his real name Joseph Glenn Herbert, the thought of calling himself a comedian felt like a pipe dream. Koy, the son of a white father and Filipina mother, saw comedy as a way to channel an overactive personality and need to make people laugh into a career. Going from coffee shop open mics in Tacoma to clubs and casinos in Las Vegas in 1989, Koy scratched out a living doing random jobs to move to L.A. in 2001 with hopes of making it big.

Working at a bank or Nordstrom Rack offered some stability as he drove up and down Sunset Boulevard in his battered Honda Prelude with one broken headlight, looking for a way forward to pursue his passion. Haddish, his longtime friend, spent years working with Koy, who served as her mentor at the Laugh Factory. Between sets on stage, the two would often take breaks to fantasize about fame.

"Jo and I would sit outside of the Laugh Factory and have these conversations and we'd be eating hot dogs wrapped in bacon and we'd be dreaming about being in a big movie, playing big theaters and helping people heal through laughter," Haddish said. "Now here we are."

Pulling off a show of this magnitude is jaw-dropping to think about, Iglesias said, even after having achieved a similar feat just a few years ago at Dodgers Stadium where he filmed his special over the course of two shows. He also set a record for fines incurred by a performer for going over his allotted time slot (a hefty $250,000 for not leaving the venue until 4 a.m.). The SoFi gig leaves him only one shot to get it right. This time around, Iglesias feels infinitely less pressure despite the bigger venue.

"[Dodger Stadium] for me was grueling," Iglesias said. "I didn't know what to expect, I didn't know how it was gonna go. Every day we were pulling our hair out trying to figure it out. Fortunately we were still able to pull it off and we learned a lot from it. This time around, believe me when I tell you the stress of this show is not even there."

Iglesias, a native of Long Beach, has spent over 30 years rising up the comedy ranks. Among his accomplishments are seven major comedy specials, a TV show ("Mr. Iglesias") and becoming the first Mexican American comic with a top-grossing worldwide tour. Like Koy, who also has seven major specials, Iglesias went through a lot of metamorphosis on stage prior to finding his calling as a gregarious, fun-loving comedian with a penchant for doing cartoon-ish voices.

Leno says one of the key factors in Fluffy's mass appeal is his likability.

"The great thing about Gabriel is that the kindness comes across, there's not a mean spirit in his body," he said. "There's a lot of comics who are really funny but people don't like them because they think they're mean-spirited. ... When you watch Gabe even when he does something that's not fall-down hysterical, you smile because you like him. ... I find him a joy to watch."

Much of what Iglesias learned about marketing himself was inspired by the WWE. The costumes, witty banter and theatrics of the wrestling ring influenced his consistent look and even allowed the name "Fluffy" to become his calling card.

"There is a certain level of pandemonium, as they say in wrestling, that's needed to get people excited," Iglesias said. "Then there's the marketing and the way that you do it – so I did study wrestling a lot."

Handing the kingdom of SoFi over to the court jesters for a night is a feat worthy of celebration.

"At the end of the day, this is a big stamp. And I think it also lets other comics know, 'Hey, man, step up your game. Let's grow this,'" Iglesias said. "And it's not, 'Step up your game,' like we're competing with each other. It's more so like, 'Let's elevate the game of comedy.'"

Right now Koy feels plenty elevated, as though he's floating every time he enters the stadium and looks up at the stands – like the night he saw Eddie Murphy all those years ago.

"You should've heard the whispers me and Gabe had to ourselves walking out of the stadium tunnel, like, 'Yo, is this really happening?!'" Koy said with a megawatt smile. "Coming from an open mic night at a coffee house, never in my wildest dreams did I say, 'Someday, a football stadium' … we're literally living our dreams right now."

BOOKS

He thinks the real world is dystopian enough

Still, Billy Ray wrote a YA novel about it

By MARY MCNAMARA
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Billy Ray is terrified.

Or at least that's what the award-winning screenwriter says in response to the innocuous-to-the-point-of-pitiful interview-opener: "How are you doing?"

Strangely, he is not referring to the state of our country (though he has been scathingly critical of both the Trump administration and the Democratic Party) or the potential perils of artificial intelligence (which he recently described to The Times as "a cancer masquerading as a profit center") or even the state of the box office in Hollywood's new age of contraction (Ray famously wrote the now-iconic, pro-cinema Nicole-Kidman-in-a-sparkly-pantsuit ad for AMC.)

No, Ray is terrified because his first novel, a YA dystopian take on "Romeo and Juliet" called "Burn the Water," is about to come out. And though he knows what it's like when a film underperforms, this feels very different.

"If you're a screenwriter and you write a movie and for some reason people don't come," he said amid the clatter and conversation in a West Hollywood coffee shop, "you can hide behind the director, you can hide behind the cast, you can hide behind all kinds of things. But if you write a book and nobody buys it, there's nobody to hide behind."

In "Burn the Water," Ray imagines London in 2425, roughly 300 years after the polar ice caps have collapsed, flooding most of the world in a cataclysmic event. In the turmoil that followed "the Great Soak" of 2100, a biological weapon was set off in London, further decimating its population by nerve gas and creating two warrior houses known as the Rogues and the Crowns.

The Rogues and the Crowns went on to engage in three centuries of warfare over the half-submerged city's dwindling resources. (The unaffiliated masses, known as the Habs, do most of the labor.) Predictably, life expectancy shortened dramatically, so many of the warriors and their captains are teenagers and children. Including Jule, ace fighter for the Crowns, and Rafe, her counterpart for the Rogues, who we meet in the book's opening pages and quickly become the star-crossed lovers of the story.

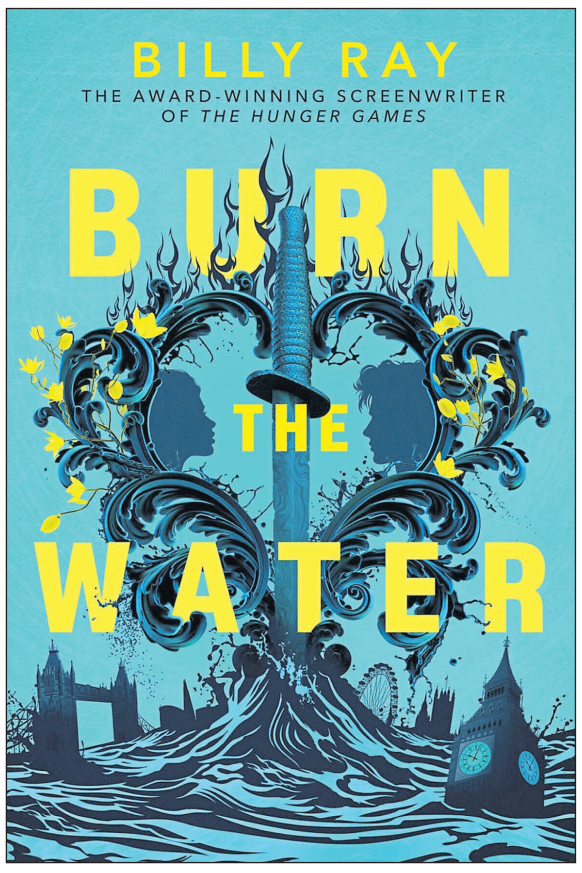
Propulsive and cinematic, "Burn the Water" cries out for a film adaptation, which isn't surprising since Ray is a screenwriter and the bones of the tale began as a movie. Fifteen years ago, he said, he heard that Greg Silverman, then head of Warner Bros., was looking for a new spin on "Romeo and Juliet." "So I thought, 'OK, what if I do "Romeo and Juliet" in the future; what would that look like?'"

As often happens in Hollywood, it turned out that this is not what Silverman had wanted at all, but Ray had become attached to his idea and so it sat on the back shelf of his mind, first as a feature, then as a series and, finally, a novel.

When the Writers Guild of America went on strike two years ago, he thought, "If I don't write a novel now, I never will."

So he did. While also hosting a Deadline-sponsored podcast called "Strike Talk," Ray spent the sixth months between when the WGA strike began (May 2, 2023) and the overlapping SAG-AFTRA strike ended (Nov. 9) learning how to write a novel.

Which, as it turns out, is very different from adapting one.



Scholastic / TNS

"I was feeling such impostor syndrome," he said. "I knew I was a screenwriter but I didn't think I was a novelist."

He set it in London for reasons topographical – "I needed a city that was on an island so it would be completely cut off" – and historic – "in homage to Shakespeare."

That homage did not extend to long soliloquy; "Burn the Water" is intentionally economical. Indeed, Ray's initial draft was "very lean – I was so afraid of boring people, of seeming pretentious." When he showed it to readers he trusted, they told him, "'This isn't a novel, it's a screenplay in prose.' They said, 'You have to understand that in a novel, you're the camera, you're the actors' faces, you're the production designer.'"

So he wrote another draft that was 50 percent longer and more descriptive. And while he hadn't intended to write a YA novel, he realized that by making his characters a few years younger than he had initially conceived them, he could reach a younger audience.

"I ultimately wanted it to be a gift to young people, young women specifically, about leadership," he said. "I've spent so much time in the political space and a lot of what we talk about is young people feeling so disenfranchised and so disempowered; they don't know what to do. And I want them to know they have the option of leading."

By "political space," Ray is referring to the fact that for almost 10 years, he has served as something of a communications consultant for the Democrat Party. "When Trump was elected the first time, I knew I had to do something beyond writing checks," he said. That something includes writing, or helping to write, speeches and campaign ads and more generally advising elected officials and candidates about "how to sound less like a Democrat" in order to appeal to voters in the center. He is currently working with 80 sitting members of the House and Senate and another 60 candidates.

"Americans are not actually divided," he has said before and repeats now. "A majority agree with the Democratic position on abortion rights, minimum wage, healthcare, cost of living and climate change."

But the party, he said, has become so afraid of offending someone that it spends more time arguing over pronoun use than it does over the fact that "in 1960, the average age of a first-time homeowner was 23; now it's 40. Talk about that. Stop excluding people from the party. Wanting secure borders does not make you a racist. Owning a gun does not make you a school shooter. Being unsure about vaccines doesn't make you a flat-Earther."

What Ray perceives as unexamined thinking and entrenched prejudice is, along with a clear warning about climate change, very present in "Burn the Water." Still raging 300 years after the event that initially provoked it, the war between the Crowns and the Rogues is essentially meaningless; it has become a self-sustaining cycle of violence based almost entirely on clan identity. Having been raised to hate the opposing side simply because they are the opposing side, Rafe and Jule initially cannot believe that their love is possible, much less sustainable.

"It is a political book," Ray said, but he was striving for an equal balance of love, violence and politics. "When people read it, I would ask three questions: 'Were you ever bored? Were you ever confused? Do you think [those things] are balanced?'"

Beyond "The Hunger Games," and the upcoming prequel "The Hunger Games: Sunrise on the Reaping," Ray has not read much YA fiction. When he was asked to adapt "The Hunger Games," he didn't know what it was. "I asked my kids – my daughter was 14, my son was 9 – and they looked at me as if I had stepped off the Mayflower."

Unlike most first-time YA novelists, however, he was able to "send an early draft to Suzanne [Collins, author of 'The Hunger Game' series] and she was hugely helpful."

"Romeo and Juliet" is, in many ways, a YA play, and love that must overcome socially inflicted obstacles (including of the interspecies variety) fuels much of the genre, as do worlds ravaged and divided by futuristic visions of current realities taken to their extremes. Ray says he chose apocalypse by water because it is the most likely result of an unchecked climate crisis, but the real villain of the piece is tribalism – the Rogues and the Crowns would rather make a bad situation worse by killing each other than unify in an attempt to solve larger problems.

Even with his ironclad writing credentials, which includes an Oscar nomination for "Captain Phillips," he seems genuinely surprised that he landed a lucrative two-book deal with Scholastic; he's already written the second in what he hopes will be a trilogy.

"We'll have to see how this one does."

If it does well, he would like to see a trilogy of films as well.

Not TV?

"Maybe," he said. "But I want to do whatever I can to help movies."

After all, as a more modern master than Shakespeare once wrote: "Heartbreak feels good in a place like this."

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Feb. 28, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. The Crossroads C.J. Box Putnam
2. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
3. Kin. Tayari Jones. Knopf
4. Cross and Sampson. Patterson/Sitts. Little, Brown
5. Alchemised. SenLinYu. Del Rey
6. The Widow. John Grisham. Doubleday
7. My Husband's Wife. Alice Feeney. Pine & Cedar
8. The Astral Library. Kate Quinn. Morrow
9. More Than Enough. Anna Quindlen. Random House
10. Half His Age. Jennette McCurdy. Ballantine

Hardcover nonfiction

1. Stripped Down. Bunnie Xo. Dey Street
2. A World Appears. Michael Pollan. Penguin Press
3. We the Women. Norah O'Donnell. Ballantine
4. Survivor. Jeff Probst. Simon & Schuster
5. If There Is No God. Dennis Prager. Broadside
6. Hormone Havoc. Amy Shah. Harvest
7. Nobody's Girl. Virginia Roberts Giuffre. Knopf
8. You Better Believe I'm Gonna Talk About It. Lisa Rinna. Dey Street
9. Runnin' Down a Dream. Bill Gurley. Crown Currency
10. Stop, in the Name of God. Charlie Kirk. Winning Team

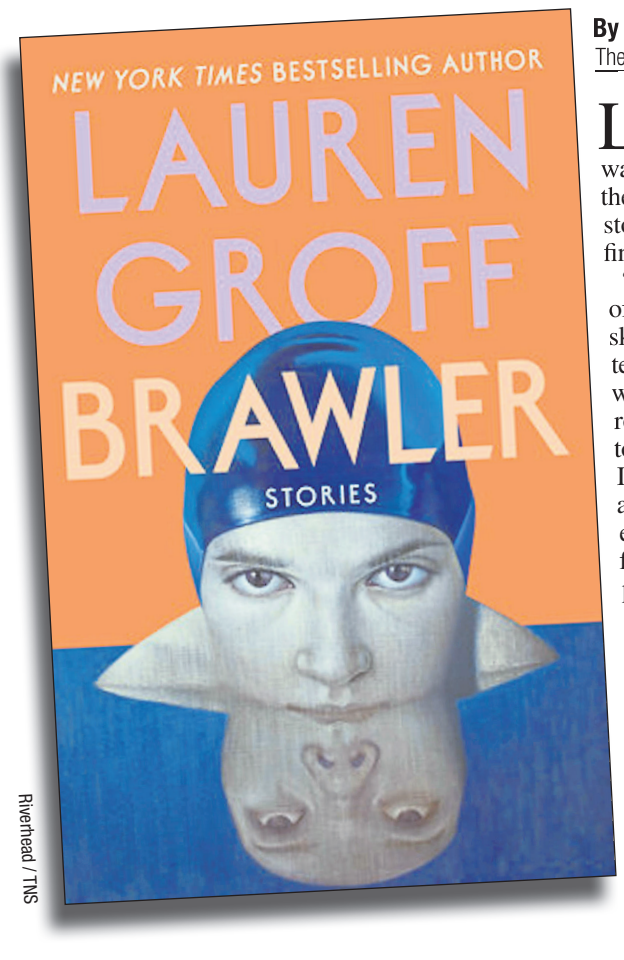
Trade paperback

1. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
2. And Now, Back to You. B.K. Borison. Berkley
3. Dear Debbie. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
4. Dungeon Crawler Carl. Matt Dinniman. Ace
5. Woman Down. Colleen Hoover. Montlake
6. We Did Not Care. Brian Nemhauser. Triumph
7. Jujutsu Kaisen, Vol. 29. Gege Akutami. Viz
8. Beauty and the Demon (deluxe ed.). Aurora Ascher. Kensington
9. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco
10. Joey. Sadie Kincaid. Mira

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

'Fates and Furies' writer Lauren Groff's great new book is 'Brawler'



Riverhead / TNS

By CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Lauren Groff 's new collection, "Brawler," should come with a warning because anyone who picks up the book and idly starts reading the first story will be unable to stop without finishing it.

"The Wind" is 18 nonstop pages of drama, tension and deft character sketching, beginning with this sentence: "Pretend, the mother had said when she crept to her daughter's room in the middle of the night, that tomorrow is just any ordinary day." It's not ordinary, though; it's the day a mom and her children attempt to escape from their abusive husband/father. It's written from the daughter's perspective, years later, so we know she survives but every word of "The Wind" is packed with danger.

Like "The Wind," several stories in "Brawler" deal with secrets. The secret of the family's escape is kept but others in the book are not, with sometimes devastating consequences. When a group of women friends gather to drink peach schnapps and tell each other "the worst thing they've ever done," a long-held confidence is revealed, one that shifted the course of one of the women's lives. In "Annunciation," the betrayal of a shy co-worker's confession alters the fates of the betrayer and the betrayed. In "Between the Shadow and the Soul," a couple, comfortably married for decades, discover they don't know each other as well as they thought they did.

Groff already has investigated the mysteries of marriage in her blockbuster " Fates and Furies," which remains her best-known book. That novel was filled with sharp, wish-I'd-thought-of-that observations about how people behave and, while I worried that a collection of nine stories might have less room for that sort of revelation, it actually has more. Each of the nine rich tales has enough character detail and intrigue to fill a full-length novel.

Like "Fates and Furies," the stories in "Brawler" wouldn't be classified as "thrillers" – there are no spies here, no murder mysteries. But Groff plants sly clues that will be important later, like Agatha Christie if she taught creative writing at the Iowa Writer's Workshop (which Groff did). If a character remarks on the epinephrine pen another carries in his fanny pack, plan on it being significant.

Avid readers may think of Ian McEwan's "Atonement" when they read "Under the Wave," another almost-a-thriller about an unsettling child who seems to have been introduced too early to adult concepts she doesn't fully understand. (Be sure to read the author's note at the end of the book, which offers brief glimpses into the origins of the stories, including this hint of autobiography about "Under the Wave": "I know a person who spent an entire week in Hawaii at a beach resort absolutely positive that a tsunami would roll in while she slept and swallow up the whole island, that she would awaken in a dark thrash, already drowning. I am not a fan of that person, who lives somewhere inside me.")

It figures that even little explanatory sketches at the back of the book are great reading, because Groff's imagery is dead-on. From "Under the Wave" again, this description of a sight that will stay with one character forever and that will likely stay with me almost as long: "The girl saw a look on the woman's face that in the future she would think of every time someone crumpled a sheet of paper into a ball."

Groff also is hilarious ("Well, isn't it hot, Slim said, interrupting Diana, which wasn't counted as rude because nobody ever listened to Diana"), provocative and plenty of other adjectives. Long story short: "Brawler" is a knockout.

AUTOMOTIVE

AUTO REVIEWS

2026 Mazda CX-5 gains a great new screen but loses something in the process

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Mazda / TNS

2026 Mazda CX-5

Base price: $29,990-$38,990

Powertrain: 2.5-liter four-cylinder

Horsepower/Torque: 187/186 pound-feet

EPA rating (combined city/highway): 26 mpg

Fuel required: Regular

Length/Width/Height: 185/73/67 inches

Ground clearance: 8.2 inches

Cargo capacity: 34-67 cubic feet

Towing capacity: 1,500 pounds

When was it decided that buttons in a car were old-fashioned? Surely it was some young punk designer in a black turtleneck who made the call. So, he took them out. All of them. And stuffed everything onto a screen the size of a small television. Naturally, the accountants applauded. No buttons to manufacture? This saves money. High fives all round for design frugality.

But when you take away the buttons, you lose more than tactile control. You lose identity.

Designers used to have this glorious playground: chunky metal switches, aircraft-style toggles, a volume knob that felt like it was milled from the crankshaft of a P-51 Mustang. You could sit in a BMW and know it was a BMW. Sit in a Jaguar and feel like you should be wearing loafers. Sit in a Cadillac and you'd instinctively reach for the remote.

Now? You get in and it's an iPad. The same flat glass slab whether you're in a Hyundai or a Mercedes-Benz. Swipe up for air conditioning. Swipe down for your dignity.

Congratulations. You've made every interior look like an airport rental car.

And so it goes with the 2026 Mazda CX-5, which now possesses the largest infotainment touchscreen in its class, an optional 15.6-inch affair that works quickly and boasts very intuitive software. Gone is the console-mounted control knob, along with physical buttons for the climate control. And yet, in the process of moving so much onto the screen, Mazda has also misplaced something more difficult to put on a spec sheet: that faint but important sense of understated, near-premium charm that once made its cabins feel a cut above the mainstream. So, while the new screen is better, quicker and more modern, it is also, somehow, less Mazda.

Blame the interior design, which is awash in disappointingly cut-rate plastic panels designed to impress company accountants rather than showroom shoppers. Money that should have been spent on finer finishes, the softer touchpoints and richer trim that elevated the once brand, appears instead to have been wired directly to Google. For Google Assistant. For Google Maps. For Google knows what else. Still, Google's voice commands work brilliantly, whether it's calling up your favorite Spotify playlist or adjusting the CX-5's climate control. But the result is a Mazda that no longer has that certain je ne sais quoi.

And the design misstep continues outside. Now some four inches longer and marginally taller and wider, the 2026 Mazda CX-5 attempts to borrow visual gravitas from its larger siblings, the CX-70 and CX-90. But instead of looking like a scaled-down expression of quiet confidence, it ends up resembling the Ford Escape's Japanese cousin, the one who studied abroad for a year and came back slightly less interesting. It's bigger. It's broader. It's technically improved. And yet, somehow, it feels as though something distinctive has been sanded off.

Thankfully, there's better news when it comes time to drive. Mazda's normally-aspirated 187-horsepower 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine is the sole powerplant for 2026, although a more powerful option is promised for 2027. On paper, that may sound like grim news delivered in a beige envelope. It isn't. Nine-out-of-ten CX-5 buyers chose this engine anyway. It runs on regular unleaded, returns an EPA-rated 26 mpg in mixed driving, and is paired with a six-speed automatic. All-wheel drive is standard. Towing capacity is rated at 1,500 pounds, some 500 pounds fewer than before, which means your jet ski will need to start dieting.

Weighing 3,856 pounds, the 2026 Mazda CX-5 reaches 60 mph in 9.6 seconds. So, it will not rearrange your internal organs. But then it never did. And that was never really the point. What continues to distinguish the CX-5 is its driving persona. This remains a deeply satisfying vehicle to drive in a way that most rivals simply cannot be bothered to attempt. The steering actually communicates with unrestrained clarity. It's reasonably quick, yet sufficiently polished so that passengers aren't flung about like loose carry-on luggage. The throttle is weighted just so. The six-speed indulges you with paddle shifters, holding a gear into higher revs if you're feeling theatrical. Body lean is kept in check. Unwanted motions are politely suppressed. It behaves like a car engineered by people who still enjoy driving.

There is some road noise. And while the seats are comfortable enough for the daily commute, their lack of meaningful side bolstering becomes apparent if you decide to treat a cloverleaf on-ramp as an event.

Practicality, at least, has improved. The cabin is more spacious, with an extra 2.3 inches of rear-seat knee room and 1.8 additional cubic feet of cargo capacity. There is even a temporary spare tire beneath the cargo floor, an increasingly rare nod to the notion that punctures still happen.

If you care more about usability than aesthetics, there is much to admire here. If design matters more, you may feel shortchanged. But the compact SUV segment is not exactly awash in beauty or brilliance. And while the 2026 Mazda CX-5 may have lost some of its former charm, it retains its dynamic edge. In a class defined largely by mediocrity, that makes it still worth a look.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

Subaru Trailseeker is an eOutback

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

2026 Subaru Trailseeker

★★★★

Vehicle type: Battery-powered, all-wheel-drive, five-passenger SUV

Price: $41,455, including $1,450 destination fee ($48,800 GT as tested)

Powerplant: 74.7 kWh lithium-ion battery with single or dual-electric-motor drive

Power: 375 horsepower

Transmission: single-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 4.4 seconds (mfr.); towing, 3,500 pounds

Weight: 4,565 pounds (as tested)

Fuel economy: EPA est. MPGe: 103-107; range, 273-308 miles (281 Premium standard, 274 for Touring as tested)

Report card

Highs: Ol' Outback wagon looks, head-up instrument display with square wheel

Lows: Priced same as Outback; lacks Outback's hands-free highway assist

The Subaru Outback SUV is an icon. Now it has an electric sibling.

While the 2026 Outback has zigged to a square, truck-like ute design, the 2026 Trailseeker has zagged to Outback's traditional wagon wardrobe with a side of off-road cladding and an infusion of high tech. I slipped into the driver seat, toggled the steering wheel paddles to medium regenerative braking and nailed the throttle. Trailseeker's twin electric motors drove like liquid silver.

Determined to satisfy the needs of 37 percent of its customers who would consider an EV for their next vehicle, the tree-hugging, all-wheel-drive, pet-friendly brand has birthed eSubaru triplets: subcompact Uncharted (Crosstrek brother), compact Solterra (Forester sister), and midsize Trailseeker.

The big Trailseeker is the most Subaru-like of the three.

In a U.S. market dominated by behemoths (GM, Toyota, Ford, Hyundai), Subaru has carved out a passionate tribe of customers – returning their loyalty with reliable, affordable pack horses that offer the best residual values in the U.S. market. So in sync is Subie with its budget-conscious, overlanding, wanderlust U.S. customers that 70 percent of its global sales are here.

But Crosstrek and Forester customers have found that affordability and wanderlust are incompatible with the limited range and expensive price tags of electrics.

The $41K-$50K Outback is a different animal.

With the average Outback price north of $40K, the midsize SUV plays to higher income households with two-car garages and a passion for the outdoors. It's a demographic that is less budget-conscious – and more brand-conscious – than Crosstrek and Forester owners. And Subaru – like Jeep – is that rare mainstream brand that can cross premium lines.

"Should I buy a BMW, Audi, Jeep or Outback?" ask some of my affluent friends. The Jeep and Subie bring outdoor cachet that many crave, like a North Face jacket or Adidas hiking shoes.

And many Outback customers may be taking a hike from the SUV's latest stylings. "Too boxy," laments Mrs. Payne.

Our friends John and Mary might agree.

Their green 2020 Outback wagon has similar style to the Trailseeker and they love its roomy interior utility, green vibe and all-season capability. And, unlike the stereotypical Outback family unit, they don't use it for road trips.

With 274 miles of range, my $49K Trailseeker Touring tester is the same price as a comparable gas-powered Outback. The Uncharted and Solterra SUVs, by contrast, are thousands of dollars more than their affordable Crosstrek and Forester siblings. If John and Mary are traveling more than 250 miles, they are flying, which means the longest-range ride Trailseeker needs to make is to, say, Metro Airport.

Install a charger in the garage, plug in every night, and Trailseeker is a treat. It's why most electric owners are two-car garage, affluent families. EV for daily commuting, gas car for longer trips.

On the crowded two-lane roads of Southern California, the Trailseeker's 375 horsepower and instant electric torque made driving a cinch. Subaru advertises impressive 4.4-second 0-60 launches for the big EV, the fastest Subie made (apologies to the WRX STI hellion).

Easing into a stoplight with one-pedal regenerative braking, I faced a looming merge as a four-lane funneled down to two. A Mercedes coupe sat at the light next to me. The light changed and – ZOT! – the Trailseeker surged effortlessly, merging left ahead of the German with multiple car lengths to spare.

On Interstate 5, Trailseeker was whisper quiet, fitting for an upscale cabin adorned with blue leather door inserts, comfortable seats, tech-tastic rotary shifter, twin charging pads for phones and a big digital console screen adorned with Lexus-like climate buttons.

Those buttons are one of the advantages of Subie's partnership with Toyota to make the Trailseeker (and sibling EVs). As is the clever instrument display, which is recessed just below the windshield to offer head-up-like instrument convenience so you don't need to take your eyes off the road.

The downside of Toyota hardware is that I often had to divert my eyes from the road to negotiate the Trailseeker's flat adaptive cruise and radio volume buttons on the steering wheel. And Trailseeker doesn't have access to Subaru's hands-free highway driving tech like the new 2026 Outback.

In SPORT mode, the steering firmed and I climbed into the mountains on twisty Ortega Highway. You won't mistake the Trailseeker for Lions running back Jahmyr Gibbs, but the big EV is noticeably lighter weight than its Hyundai EV6 (4,900 pounds) and Chevy Blazer EV (5,600 pounds) peers.

With its 75-kWh battery located low in the chassis, the Trailseeker could be hustled, not unlike the 4,000-pound gas Outback.

Hustle it on a long journey and your patience will be tested compared to the Outback and its big 18.5-gallon fuel tank. Where the Outback will travel 600 miles and then fill up to 100 percent in five minutes, my Trailseeker tester with 274-mile range will need to stop every 175 miles or so (because you want to fill EVs between 20 percent and 80 percent of charge) for 20 minutes.

Happily, the Subie's charging infrastructure is robust thanks to its access to (most) Tesla Superchargers as well as other networks like EVGo and Electrify America. Plug the Trailseeker's Tesla-style NACS plug into the Tesla charger and it will automatically bill to your credit card via the Subaru app. Slick.

"Hey, Subaru, change driver's temperature to 70 degrees," I barked on a chilly, 50-degree California day.

Such high-tech goodies complement signature Outback features like standard roof rack and enough rear cargo space (32 cubic feet) for the average Subie owner's dog, cat, chicken, bird and gerbil cages.

Most Subaru customers will stop at the trail head to off-load their bikes – and dog – for long adventures, though the 'Ru does offer a cool multi-terrain monitor so you can "see through your hood" for better tire placement at low speeds on trails, or better yet, parking in a pothole-cratered lot.

Off-roaders might pine for the Outback Wilderness model's 9.5 inches of ground clearance and all-terrain tires. But Trailseeker doesn't offer the latter because they would suck another 60 miles off its already limited range. This Trailseeker seeks local trails only. Which is all its two-car garage owners will ask for.

Want to travel further? Get a gas Outback. Or a Jeep.

Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.

TECHNOLOGY

TECH REVIEW

Dangbei DBOX02 Pro is ready for your living room

Dangbei / TNS

I was very impressed with the picture and sound quality of the Dangbei DBOX02 Pro. You don't need an advanced IT degree to get it set up and you shouldn't need an AV professional to help you get it looking and sounding great.

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

I love a big TV.

There's nothing like watching a movie or sporting event on a really big screen, but TVs can get expensive when you're talking about screens larger than 75 inches.

There comes a price/size where you'll realize a projector could be a better option, depending on your room setup.

Today we are looking at the **Dangbei DBOX02 Pro**, a 4K Ultra HD projector with picture quality that really impressed me and you can have it project an image on your wall or screen at sizes ranging from 40 inches up to 300 inches (which is 27 feet diagonally). Optimally, Dangbei only recommends images up to 150 inches, or roughly 13 feet, diagonally. If you choose to go larger, you'll need to be in a really dark room, and the image will be not as bright.

The DBOX02 Pro (currently $1,199, us.dangbei.com) uses a DLP laser light source with a brightness of 2,000 ISO lumens and a resolution of 3,840 x 2,160 pixels. The projector delivers HDR10+/HLG with deep blacks and enough brightness to be used for daytime viewing. It can also project 3D content, if that's to your liking.

It runs the Google TV operating system, which is very easy to navigate and includes every app and streaming service you'd ever need, beginning with a certified Netflix app, which means your Netflix streaming experience will be smooth and clear.

The DBOX02 Pro has an ethernet port as well as Wi-Fi 6 to be used for streaming and Bluetooth 5.2 so you can connect wireless headphones.

If you don't have an external sound system, the DBOX02 Pro has a pair of built-in 12w speakers that provide very nice sound.

Other ports include two HDMI ports – one with eARC – to connect home theater receivers, as well as a standard 3.5mm headphone jack and one S/PDIF (optical audio) output. There are also two USB-A ports for playing local media.

Setup is AI assisted with auto focus, auto keystone correction, auto screen fit, obstacle avoidance and eye protection.

The DBOX02 Pro has a built-in stand that rotates 360 degrees and tilts up to 120 degrees to make it very easy to get the best picture on your particular wall or screen or even ceiling. Interestingly, the external power supply connects to the rotating base, to make placement even easier.

If you are streaming your video through Wi-Fi, you only need to plug in the projector into the wall for electricity and you're ready to set it up.

You can choose to set up with the Google TV operating system or as a plain-old projector, utilizing the HDMI ports if you want to show content from a computer or Roku or Apple TV device or any other HDMI source.

If you choose the Google TV setup, Dangbei takes you through the setup steps to use your phone to enter your Google account credentials, but you do have the option of using the remote to type out your email and password on an onscreen keyboard.

If you've ever set up a Google TV device before, Google will remember and offer to set up the projector using the same account and even load the same streaming apps.

I did learn a few things to make setup easier that I didn't find in the manual.

Ethernet is a great option if you have a connection close by, and you can use a USB-ethernet adapter if you need it.

You can also use the USB ports to connect a mouse and keyboard for easier input and navigation if you don't want to use the remote. This is very handy when setting things up or entering login information for new apps.

Whenever you move the projector, it will automatically run an autofocus and auto configure the picture placement options, if you have those turned on in the settings.

Overall, the DBOX02 Pro is a great choice for any living room or home theater.

Unlike some of Dangbei's smaller projectors, this one does not come with a case to carry it around. This one is designed to park itself on a shelf or table and stay put.

Because the stand incorporates the power cable, you can't remove it, so there is not a way to connect it to a normal ceiling mount. You'd need a shelf mount.

I was very impressed with the picture and sound quality of the Dangbei DBOX02 Pro. You don't need an advanced IT degree to get it set up and you shouldn't need an AV professional to help you get it looking and sounding great.

I do wish the remote had a few more buttons, and I wish it was backlit, so you could see what you're pressing when you're in a dark room.

My current living room TV is a 65-inch TCL, but I'm currently thinking of how I can replace it with this projector. Now, if I could only find a wall with space for a larger screen.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossman techadviser@gmail.com.

GADGETS

Unique headphones

MorningBlues wireless headphones VWS X1.
MorningBlues / TNS

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

In the crowded headphone market, aside from great sound, products often need another feature to stand out. And that's exactly what the MorningBlues wireless headphones VWS X1 have with their unique, fashionable and personalized detachable 2.2-inch OLED touchscreens on each earcup.

They are promoted by MorningBlues as the world's first headphones with detachable screens. These are the first I've seen or heard of, so I'm not going to dispute that claim. Add to that, they also have great sound and many other attractive features.

The 1.3-inch OLED touchscreens are integrated into each ear cup for a truly interactive, customizable experience. You can display and upload your own personal images, text or video to the OLED screens. There's no limit; it can be pictures of your favorite artists, lyrics, pictures of family members or pets – whatever you want displayed.

MorningBlues also has a gallery of vibe portraits to choose from. Each display can glow at night, making them really stand out. If you don't want them on, since they are held on magnetically, you can just remove them. Each display measures 2.2 by 2.2 by 0.35 inches with HD clarity.

With the MorningBlues companion app, the displays can be customized with your digital files, including how they are displayed and rotated. The app also controls brightness and many audio features.

While the displays are innovative and allow you to show off your personalization, if they didn't have great sound, you wouldn't want these headphones. But they shine in the sound category at any volume level across all my playlist categories. Each padded earcup has a 40mm dynamic driver, powered by Jamo and a Qualcomm advanced audio chipset. The adjustable headband and earcups have a silver finish.

All the on-ear controls were responsive for changing modes (normal/off, active noise cancellation, and transparent). The ANC worked well in blocking outside noise.

The Bluetooth 5.4 headphones have multipoint connectivity. The headphones are listed to run for 60 hours, and the displays run independently for 9 hours before a charge is needed. The displays are charged with the included portable charging case. There's no IP rating, so please don't take them for a swim.

https://www.morningblues.com/products/morningblues-headphone-vws-x1 $499.00

Airdog Aircap purifier.
Airdog / TNS

The Airdog Aircap purifier is so portable and versatile that it's ideal for home and work, and it even fits perfectly in your car's cupholder.

It's about the size of a small water bottle and is designed to unlock healthier living by breathing the cleanest air. There's not a lot to it. After it's charged, you'll get healthier, cleaner air around you from a device designed to purify your immediate surroundings with TPA technology.

A quick Google search explained TPA technology, an advanced air filtration method that uses a high-voltage electrostatic field to actively destroy and capture airborne pollutants.

With the Aircap, air is captured, and it is said to destroy and remove up to 99 percent of harmful particles in the air. This includes pollutants, allergies, viruses, smoke, germs, bacteria and dust. Airdog says it well on their site that you can't control the environments you go into, but you can clear the air around you.

Not only will this be ideal in your vehicle, but also consider it when traveling and when you get into rental cars or hotel rooms that have been smoked in. You can take it to work, the gym or just keep it sitting next to you at home; the uses are endless. It's rated to work in your personal space of up to 35 square feet. For car use, it will clear a standard-sized vehicle every 10 minutes.

The eco- and cost-friendly filter is washable, which in itself is a big thing. That avoids filter subscription fees, which I've seen on similar devices.

There are a few ways to use it; the power and modes are activated with buttons and toggle switches. In addition to being cup holder-friendly, it stands on a flat surface or can be angled up to 60 degrees.

I got stuck on the auto mode, where the Aircap will turn on automatically when there is motion or off if it has been still for 15 minutes. Obviously, in manual mode, it will work whenever you turn it on. Aside from the modes, there are three speeds: low, normal and turbo, all of which are relatively quiet.

https://airdogusa.com/products/aircap-portable-air-purifier $249.00 in white or black

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

VPN 101

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

This week a reader writes: "I've been reading a lot lately how VPN can protect your privacy, avoid marketing ploys and help with hacking. At one time, my university provided VPN for us when we were overseas (helped get through the Great Firewall of China), but I have no idea how it might be implemented for private use. Could you address the pros and cons of using a VPN service, and how one goes about setting that up?"

VPN stands for Virtual Private Network, which is a service you load onto your computer or phone to improve privacy and security.

A VPN runs all your internet traffic through a "tunnel" to the servers run by the VPN company. It also encrypts all your traffic so not even people sharing (or stealing) your home Wi-Fi can intercept it.

VPN can also hide your real IP address, which is the unique address assigned to every device that connects to the internet.

A VPN can also route your traffic through other countries, so it appears you are located in that country.

I haven't personally tried, but if you connect to a VPN server located in another country and then launch a streaming service like Netflix, you can view that country's streaming offerings, which can be very different from the U.S.-based titles.

Once you research VPN services, you'll find services that are free and services that have a monthly (or annual) subscription.

Because of the nature of the task you're asking the VPN service to provide, I don't have a free VPN I'd recommend. You're asking the VPN to secure your most sensitive data, and you don't want to find out the hard way that you get what you pay for.

Free VPNs will show you ads and even sell your data to third parties.

The most recommended VPN services include SurfShark, NordVPN and ExpressVPN.

You'll find these services offer subscriptions starting at just a few dollars per month, but do your homework. The prices will vary depending on the features offered and the number of devices you can protect.

Once you subscribe to a service, you'll download the VPN software for all your devices, including your smartphones, and walk through the steps to log in and set up the protection you choose.

Some services, like SurfShark, offer software that can run on some Wi-Fi routers to protect all the traffic going through all your wirelessly connected devices.

What are the pros?

A VPN is another layer of protection, which is a good thing, especially away from your home when you might be connecting through a public hotspot like a hotel or coffee shop.

A VPN can also hide you from third-party tracking, which can reduce the amount of data collected about you.

What are the cons?

A VPN won't protect against viruses or malware. You can still get infected if you visit the wrong websites or follow suspect links.

A VPN can also introduce latency (slowness) to your connection, especially over cell networks.

I use a VPN to access resources at work because it's required, but I personally don't use a VPN in my everyday internet use, but I also don't connect to public Wi-Fi networks. If I'm spending the night at a hotel, I'll opt for using the hotspot feature of my cell phone, which is more secure than any public Wi-Fi.

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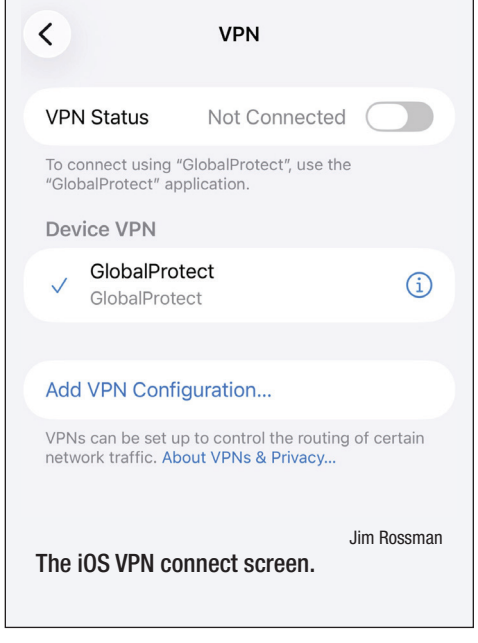
VPN
VPN Status
Not Connected
To connect using "GlobalProtect", use the "GlobalProtect" application.
Device VPN
GlobalProtect
GlobalProtect
Add VPN Configuration...
VPNs can be set up to control the routing of certain network traffic. About VPNs & Privacy...

Jim Rossman

The iOS VPN connect screen.

Photos by Matias J. Ocner / Miami Herald / TNS

Pastor Jennifer LeClaire holds a tablet displaying an image from a deepfake video of herself that circulated online and was used to scam her congregants.

Scamming the faithful:

Pastors warn congregants about AI deepfakes

By LAUREN COSTANTINO
Miami Herald (TNS)

Pastor Jennifer LeClaire talks with church member, Vanessa Angelini, at Awakening House of Prayer on Feb. 20 in Davie, Florida. LeClaire was the victim of a deepfake in which an artificial intelligence-generated video was made to look and sound like her and was used to ask a follower for money.

MIAMI – When a man named Sergio messaged Pastor Jennifer LeClaire insisting she had promised him a personal phone call and prophetic counseling, she assumed it was a misunderstanding.

Though he was an avid follower of the South Florida pastor's morning prayer broadcast on Facebook, LeClaire didn't know him.

Sergio told LeClaire that he was still waiting for her to deliver on what she had promised him. He even threatened to call the police.

But what Sergio had encountered was a deepfake video of LeClaire circulating online. The artificial intelligence–generated video was made to look and sound like LeClaire, preaching in what looked like her familiar home setting and addressing Sergio in her distinctive tone. The scammer used the fabricated video to gain Sergio's trust – and eventually asked him for money.

"I felt sorry for him and tried to explain that this was not me, but he could not be convinced," said LeClaire, pastor of a nondenominational Christian church in Davie called Awakening House of Prayer.

LeClaire, who has a following of nearly 600,000 on YouTube, joins a small but growing number of faith leaders who have encountered a concerning technological trend: AI-generated videos, called deepfakes, imitating pastors to spread false messages and scam congregants out of their money.

Deepfakes are a type of synthetic content created or modified by artificial intelligence. Though they have been around for years, the methods to create them are becoming more accessible, opening the door for scammers. Now, the deepfakes have found their way to church.

"This is essentially hijacking someone's identity and putting words in their mouth, making promises they don't intend to keep, and potentially compromising the integrity of the pastor," said LeClaire.

Rev. Christopher Benek, pastor at First Miami Presbyterian Church in Miami and an expert in the field of religion and technology, said it's important for church leaders to build trust with congregants and teach them how to spot the scammers.

"We have to tell people, just because someone's in the church, if they ask you for money, don't give it to them," he said. "It's teaching people to actually have some discernment about it."

Benek sees deepfakes as the next iteration of the email phishing scams that became a problem for pastors in the early 2000s.

"Little old ladies would send money, thinking they're helping the church, only to find out they got scammed," said Benek.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, some aspects to look for in a deepfake are visual distortions and warped images, unsettling silences and distorted sound. Things like video inconsistencies, unnatural movement, poor video or audio quality can also be signs of synthetic content.

In March 2025, LeClaire posted a video warning her followers about the deepfake that had been circulating of her. She posted part of the AI-generated video, asking her followers to spot the differences. Being proactive and educating people is key, she said, in helping followers spot similar scams.

"They're preying on the trusted believers on my good name, exploiting their faith for their own wicked ends," she said in the video with over 14,000 views.

Beyond her church in Fort Lauderdale, LeCLaire has built a robust online community, made up of thousands of followers – many who look to her for advice on topics she preaches about daily, including how to engage in spiritual warfare and defeat worldly demons.

She has international followers, some of whom, like Sergio, don't speak English as their first language. LeClaire said she thinks this could be a factor in why he believed the deepfake to be real.

In the deepfake, pastor LeClaire, though a bit fuzzy and distorted, spoke with authority.

"Please be at peace, this is Jennifer. Now Satan is just trying to confuse you," the AI LeClaire said. "Cheer up and let's get more better in Christ Jesus together."

The biggest tell of the fake video, LeClaire said, was the poor grammar. Some commenters took note.

"Wow, anyone who has ever seen or heard Jennifer would be able to tell something was off," one said. "You don't speak like this, and you don't blink that much," said another.

Religious influencers at risk

Father Rafael Capó, a Catholic priest in Miami with a growing social media following, said he has experienced similar AI-perpetuated scams.

A religious digital influencer, Capó uses social media as a way to spread the message of the Catholic Church. His bodybuilding videos blend faith with fitness, gaining him international attention and over 112,000 followers on Instagram. But with that celebrity-like status also comes risk.

Over the past few years, he's started to see more and more fake profiles of himself popping up on the internet. Using AI, scammers created a false profile of Capó and then sent messages to his followers, often asking for money for a made-up ministry.

"It all comes down to identity theft, creating images and videos and using their tools to try to get your identity and misuse it to get money. It's unfortunate," said Capó, who is also the vice president of mission and ministry and dean of Theology at St. Thomas University.

It's been struggle to keep the scams under control, Capó said. And the target is not just older people.

"I would get messages from young people. 'Father, is this social media profile yours?,'" he said.

Capó received hundreds of messages from followers who came across the fake profiles. The scams decreased, he said, after social media platforms started using multifactor verifications to secure his real profile.

Another 21st century scam he's encountered: clergy are being targeted by scammers who have created fake charities and reached out to Capó online, hoping the empathetic faith leader might donate money.

The Catholic Church is aware of the implications of emerging technologies such as AI. At a recent conference for digital evangelizers and Catholic influencers, Pope Leo XIV noted how to harness the potential benefits of AI while recognizing that there are bad actors out there using it to accumulate wealth and power for the few.

Leo said humans are meant to be "co-workers in the work of creation," not merely passive consumers of AI-generated content. He raised other issues, including the potential impacts AI can have on a child's growth and development, and the concerns he has about AI's effects on "humanity's openness to truth and beauty," and capacity for creativity.

Father Capó sums it up: "Churches need to be a voice for how AI and all the digital platforms ... are at the service of the human person and not attacking the human person."

Destroying trust in churches

Benek said these new sophisticated scams further erode trust in religious institutions – most of which have dealt with some sort of scandal in recent memory.

"We've had so many failures in the church that we should be learning from those things," he said.

Benek said he understands being fearful of powerful technology, but points out that AI is already being used by churches and other institutions. He believes that it's up to faith leaders to embrace AI and adapt the church accordingly – just like religious institutions have done with past technological advancements.

Ultimately, the goal for pastors, Benek said, is to protect the message of the church amid the new technological advancement. It's also about identifying the potential risks, he said.

"If you're online, and you're using more tech tools, you're going to be more susceptible to some of those things," he said. "But it's not to say 'don't use tech tools.' It's to discern and say 'what are our risks?'"

For LeClaire, the deepfake experience brought up other concerns about how AI can be used to harm a pastor's reputation. She worries that AI could also be used to spread "polarizing messages, false prophecies," or be used to generate images of religious leaders doing illicit activities like "snorting cocaine."

As long as people are seeking help from pastors and faith leaders, the scams will arise, she said.

"AI is going to get better and better, and it will be more and more difficult to discern the true from the false, unless you really know someone's heart," she said.

HOME & GARDEN

DESIGN RECIPES

Bathroom envy

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Today's bathrooms are no longer just about function. They're about mood, luxurious and innovative materials, and bold design.

From classic white-on-white bathrooms to infusing black for high contrast and interesting materials and patterns, high-end bathrooms are pushing design limits beyond just boring and bland. The goal is to create a bathroom that strikes the right balance of color and materials without becoming overwhelming.

Looking for bathroom design ideas? Here are some top tips.

Do

1. Do embrace white-on-white or monochromatic neutrals for a classic, spa like feel.

2. Do use black tile to add drama and sophistication. Black tiles can be used for feature walls and all over color as well as features such as cabinetry and shower doors.

3. Do mix black with unexpected accents such as citrus colors including green, yellow and orange.

4. Do treat lighting as a design feature. Statement sconces, especially in color or sculptural forms, elevate the bathroom from purely functional to design forward.

5. Do look for ways to add bold patterns. This can be done using tile or even wallpaper.

Don't

1. Don't mix too many bold elements at once. Often less is more.

2. Don't ignore scale and proportion. Large patterns or dark finishes can overwhelm smaller bathrooms if not carefully balanced with lighter elements.

3. Don't forget to incorporate signature lighting to make a statement in the bathroom.

4. Don't forget to use finishes such as brass and nickel to make a design statement.

5. Don't forget to think "function first." Elements such as functional layouts, storage and easy to clean materials shouldn't be overlooked.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

ABOVE: The infusion of black accents creates a sense of modernity and luxury in this master bathroom. LEFT: Black tiles paired with lime green sconces creates a powder room that is luxurious and evocative.

Handout photos / TNS

How can I prepare my home for spring?

Winter can take a toll on your home, but a little spring prep will have it good-as-new in no time. Luckily, I have a foolproof spring checklist that covers everything you need to know about preparing your home for spring.

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

The biggest transition from winter to spring happens outside of your home. The roof, gutters, lawn and flowerbeds can all get damaged in the winter months, so it's important to give them a little extra attention in the spring. Clean your gutters (or have them professionally cleaned) and inspect your roof from the ground. If you see any broken or missing shingles, bring in a pro to fix the damage. It's also a good idea to prepare and sharpen your gardening tools, add fresh mulch to your flowerbeds, and dethatch and aerate your lawn.

Early spring is the perfect time to take on any cleaning tasks you've been putting off. For example, you can clean your window tracks, which tend to collect a lot of dirt, insects and other debris over the fall and winter months. This will ensure your windows are nice and clean when you open them up to let the fresh spring air in. This is also a great time to clean under and behind furniture and large appliances. If you don't have time to clean yourself, consider hiring a professional to deep clean the space for you.

Dreamstime / TNS

Get your home ready for spring by de-winterizing your yard, completing essential maintenance tasks, and deep cleaning your home.

When I think of spring cleaning, decluttering also comes to mind. Many people accumulate a lot of stuff during the holidays, and spring is the ideal time to declutter and reset your home. Go through your home and donate or throw away any items that you no longer want or need. You'd be surprised what items are still hanging around your home!

Once you've finished cleaning, make sure you're up to date on your vital maintenance tasks, like servicing your HVAC unit, replacing the batteries in your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, replacing your air filters, and cleaning out your dryer vent. While these tasks aren't as satisfying as spring cleaning, they're extremely important to the health and longevity of your home.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.

TRAVEL

Valerie Macon / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

Tourist on Broadway Street in Nashville, Tennessee, during the tourist season on June 16, 2022 in Nashville.

How tightening budgets, recession fears are impacting travel decisions

By MIA TAYLOR
TravelPulse (TNS)

When economic rough patches arise, what's the first thing to get cut in your household budget? Are there certain items that are sacred and remain in place no matter what?

With the cost of living in this country skyrocketing over the past year amid the Trump Administration's new tariff policies and related worries about a recession, travel budgets may be on the chopping block in some households.

A new study conducted by MDRT, an association of financial professionals, found that 55 percent of Americans will "eliminate their travel and leisure budgets in the case of a recession."

A closer look at that development reveals that 15 percent of Gen Z, 29 percent of Millennials, and 25 percent of Baby Boomers expressed the need to ax their travel budgets should a recession take place.

The same study found that a whopping 80 percent of consumers are at least slightly concerned about a recession.

That's not good news for the travel industry.

But travel experts interviewed by TravelPulse indicate that the situation developing across America is very nuanced and reflects the increasing wealth divide in this country. High-net-worth individuals are traveling as usual, while middle-income families, who are among the hardest hit by new tariff policies and price hikes, are busy adjusting travel plans so they can still afford a vacation.

Here's a closer look at what travel industry experts are witnessing from clients amid recession fears, including the many types of changes travelers are making in order to maintain their vacation plans.

Optimizing for affordability

As a travel expert specializing in outdoor travel, Jen Young has a front-row seat to how Americans are responding to growing money worries.

Young is the co-founder and CMO of the RV rental marketplace Outdoorsy, and she says Americans are not necessarily canceling travel plans or staying home. Rather, they're fine-tuning travel details with a heightened focus on cutting costs wherever possible.

"They are pivoting away from the 'travel tax' of expensive flights, surging hotel costs (inflated by events like the World Cup) and eating out expenses," says Young. Instead, Americans are shifting toward high-value experiences that give them more financial control, adds Young. In Outdoorsy's case, that shift has already translated into a 15 percent year-over-year increase in summer RV rentals.

A growing number of families are turning to RV vacations as a travel hack that Young dubs the "kitchen-on-wheels" strategy. "Dining out has officially become the number one 'hidden' travel expense for travelers," Young continues. "As a result, Outdoorsy is seeing a surge in RV interest specifically because it allows families to 'bring the grocery store with them.' By avoiding $15 airport sandwiches and $200 family dinners, travelers are cutting total trip costs by up to 60 percent compared to traditional air and hotel travel."

Reframing vacations

Paul Whitten, founder of Nashville Adventures, a company that provides history and outdoor tours across middle Tennessee, says the growing chatter about Americans' money concerns is hardly overblown. In conversations he's had with people throughout the Nashville area, the worries are ever-present.

"Inflation is real. Groceries are real," says Whitten. But here's the caveat Whitten quickly adds: Burnout among Americans is also real. So, instead of canceling travel altogether, many are "reframing it," suggests Whitten.

"They're asking, 'What's the smartest way to do this?'" Whitten explains.

"People don't stop traveling per se, they just travel different," Whitten continues. "For a family of four, Disney World might be a no-go, but that state park that's just two hours away looks pretty good."

Americans seeking to preserve the mental wellness that travel provides are doing so by booking closer to home, shortening trips, and choosing experiences that cost less and provide a better experience, explains Whitten.

LaDell Carter, founder and lead luxury lifestyle travel designer at Royal Expression Travels, offers a similar assessment of the unfolding reality. She says middle-class and first-time travelers are likely to make some adjustments during times of recession, including increasingly:

- Exploring local options for travel within their own states (Translation: staycation)
- Shortening the length of vacations (typically from 10 days to 4 or 5)
- Choosing larger, more affordable resort properties (instead of boutique hotels)
- Looking for all-inclusive packages so that their costs are controlled

"I believe that budget sensitive travelers are expressing concern about value, timing, and flexibility," says Carter. "I'm finding that these travelers are thinking through their decisions and evaluating destinations more critically…I believe they're looking for the best deals during off peak periods."

A tale of two Americas

In the luxury travel segment, there's generally no reduction in travel during economic downturns, Carter explains. Ultra-high-net-worth individuals don't cancel their travel plans when economic conditions decline. Rather, travel for this particular demographic is viewed as "a base lifestyle expense."

"It's an integral component of their routine, just like real estate or education," adds Carter.

Additionally, if ultra-high-net-worth travelers are making adjustments to their travel plans, it's not about cost-cutting. Instead, it's typically related to convenience and efficiency.

"For instance, they may choose an all-inclusive package not because they need to get a better price, but because they dislike reconciling multiple invoices after their trip," says Carter. "An all-inclusive package reduces the number of invoices that they must reconcile and provides greater simplicity in terms of managing their expenses."

Tips for cutting travel costs

If you're among the Americans feeling the economic pinch right now, you're not alone.

As ABC News reported this week, President Donald Trump's tariffs cost the average American household $1,000 last year, according to new research from the nonpartisan Tax Foundation. And that cost is expected to soar to $1,300 per household this year.

So, what should you do if you want to maintain your travel plans? Shortening the duration of a vacation may seem like a logical choice. But Carter says taking this step does not necessarily deliver much cost savings.

"In fact, shorter trips often carry a higher nightly rate per night, and airfare costs are still fixed," Carter explains. "Additionally, shortening a vacation means losing the ability to utilize the long-term reset benefits of extended time away."

Instead, Carter suggests the smartest way to cut vacation costs is often to switch to a destination with lower demand-driven pricing. For example, rather than planning to visit Italy during peak season, consider visiting Portugal during shoulder season (the time period between peak travel seasons).

Alternatively, rather than visiting a hot spot like Rome or Venice, opt for lesser-known regions that are likely to be less crowded, while still offering similar opportunities. When it comes to Italy, there are numerous locales that fit this bill, particularly throughout the regions of Puglia, Calabria, and Liguria.

Christine Phillips, founder of the bespoke travel planning agency BonVoyage Christine, is giving her clients similar guidance.

"In many cases, I'm advising clients to rethink timing and destination rather than eliminate the trip altogether," she says. "That might mean skipping the most popular, high-demand cities and looking at destinations that offer a similar aesthetic or cultural experience without peak pricing."

On this front, Phillips says instead of automatically booking Greece in high season, consider Bodrum, Turkey or another coastal destination that delivers similar Riviera energy with better overall value. "I'm also encouraging shoulder-season travel whenever possible," adds Phillips. "Not only does it reduce cost, but it often improves the experience – fewer crowds, better service, and more availability. Clients are increasingly open to that shift."

Travel desire and demand is here to stay

One last note on the topic. Yes,the economic pressures and fears that have emerged for Americans during the past 14 months are very real. Day after day, new layoffs are announced across all industries, and making ends meet amid the rising cost of living is being felt coast to coast. Those are realities for scores of Americans.

But in more than a few cases, Americans are also digging in and not giving up on travel, say experts. With everything going on in the world these days, travel is widely viewed as essential to wellbeing.

"Travelers will tend to trim other discretionary expenses such as dining out, entertainment, and retail to preserve trips they've prioritized for wellbeing and connection," says Dulani Porter, executive vice president and partner with SPARK, a marketing and advertising agency that works with travel and hospitality brands.

The widely cited "55 percent" statistic reflects anxiety and intent under economic pressure, but wider industry data and on-the-ground observations across the travel and hospitality industries suggest resilience, continues Porter. "Americans are planning smarter, shopping harder for value, and redefining what travel looks like in tighter economic times, rather than abandoning it altogether," she says.

As for Carter, of Royal Expressions Travel, she says the reality is that recessions do not eliminate travel, they change it.

"Some travelers will shift their focus toward domestic travel, others will travel during less busy times. Still, others will continue to travel without interruption," says Carter. "Ultimately, the resilience of the industry exists because the reasons for travel have evolved to include aspects of wellbeing, connection, and professional sustainability."

TRAVEL TIPS

Is Cancun safe for American travelers? Safety tips and advice ahead of spring break

Since the recent gang-led violence in portions of western Mexico, including Puerto Vallarta, travelers have been less confident about traveling to Mexico, period.

Yet as we enter a busy spring break travel season, in which many Americans are certain to head down to popular Cancun, new questions about safety are being researched online and asked to travel advisers.

So, to answer your questions, we found the most relevant news and advice for you to know and share with others, from travel adviser experts to the most recent communication from the destination itself.

Is Cancun safe?

In short, as safe as it always has been.

As of Feb. 23, the state of Quintana Roo, in which many destinations along the Caribbean coastline, including Cancun, are located, issued this statement: "Tourism activity across the Mexican Caribbean continues to operate normally. All four international airports in the state, as well as ports, cruise terminals, ground transportation services, hotels, and tourism experiences throughout the destination, are functioning without disruptions. No interruptions to travel or visitor services have been reported."

While the statement noted there were isolated incidents of violence in the state, all were responded to and did not impact tourists. "... Quintana Roo maintains active tourism security protocols in coordination with federal, state, and local authorities, ensuring stability and continuous attention in high-traffic areas."

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico issued a new alert for travelers heading to Mexico for spring break on March 2, warning that crime from kidnapping to robbery or assault can happen anywhere, even in tourist zones.

The Embassy encourages travelers to be cautious, register with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) and view the state-by-state travel advisory guide for Mexico, along with a few other helpful tips, like carrying your valid passport with you.

The Embassy also encourages travelers to drink responsibly and seek medical attention if they feel ill, monitor their credit and debit card accounts for unauthorized transactions, protect personal possessions (don't flaunt visibly flaunt wealth) and tell friends or family about travel plans so people know where they are.

Additionally, travelers should use official airport taxi stands or app-based transportation services like Uber. Drive only during the daylight hours, and avoid being out at night.

Those heading to Quintana Roo, including Cancun, Tulum, Cozumel or Playa del Carmen should download the destination's "Guest Assist" app for emergency assistance and services.

Mexico is currently at a Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution advisory level, according to the U.S. State Department and Quintana Roo remains at its Level 2 advisory also, which has not changed since August 2025.

"Regarding the safety of Cancun or any travel destination, we always inform our clients that they need to do what they are comfortable with," said Kari Dillon, Owner of Marvelous Mouse Travels. "With that said, I personally spent 19 days in Cancun in January this year and felt as safe there as any city in America and would have no hesitation personally traveling there today. The incident in Puerto Vallarta last month has increased fear about traveling to Cancun. However, the distance between Cancun and Puerto Vallarta is significant. Personally, I equate it to something happening in California is not going to prevent me from traveling to Chicago."

What do travel advisers think about traveling to Cancun?

Travel advisers are weighing in.

"In all my years of traveling there, I have never felt unsafe," said Autumn Trussell-Murray, Owner of Abundant Travel – Dream Vacations. "No destination is without risk, including right here in the United States. Smart travel means being aware of your surroundings and the situations you put yourself in."

A lot of advisers focus on staying smart, aware of your surroundings, and cautious when traveling – which they'd advise anywhere, not just in Cancun. Precaution seems to be the biggest recommendation from advisers, as Kristen Andrade explains.

"I've traveled to Cancun solo as a female countless times, exercising basic safety measures such as staying alert, only leaving the resort with an organized and vetted group, and avoiding dark alleyways or inappropriate places," explained Kristen Andrade, Directory of Operations & Travel Advisor Development at Favorite Grampy Travels/FG Luxury Travel. "It really comes down to basic self-responsibility, more so than Cancun being inherently 'dangerous'. I have no issues encouraging women, families, or solo travelers to head to Cancun and have a great vacation!"

Jennifer Morris, Owner of Let's Go Lux Travel, encourages travelers to feel confident by booking with reputable transfer companies, stay at resorts recommended by advisers and go off-property with reputable tour operators, avoid carrying anything prohibited in Mexico, like vaping paraphernalia and be aware of surroundings at all times.

"As a travel adviser for 23 years, 'Is Cancun safe?' is one of the most common questions I receive," said Morris. "I understand why travelers ask; headlines regarding crime in Mexico are frequent. However, it is important to recognize that crime exists everywhere, including in our own country. One thing I have learned over the years is that the hotel zones are heavily monitored. We have to remember that tourism drives their local economy.

"… Is Mexico completely risk-free? No destination is," Morris continued. "Not Cancun. Not Miami, Not New York City. But it is a safe, well-established tourist destination when you travel responsibly. And as a travel adviser, it is our job not to ignore the risks but to understand them and help our clients to navigate them the best way we know how to."

– Lacey Pfalz / TravelPulse (TNS)